

Twists, Turns, And Tenderness

by E.Wills

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Summary: Another ongoing, one-shot collection. It is currently an undecided number of scenes from the love lives of our favorite Vikings. Rating and content is fluid, depending on your requests and suggestions, dear readers (ranges T to M). Definitely Hiccstrid. Because, of course it is! There may be other pairings sprinkled in, somewhere.

1. The Braid War

*****PLEASE READ***** Author's Note: **So, this is going to be a little fanfic side-project of mine. There won't be any rhyme or reason to its updates, which is why I have no qualms about publishing yet another work while I still have two more fics outstanding. A collection of one-shots does not command my constant attention as much as full-length, plot-driven work.

This fic started when I received a PM from a fan requesting I write about the origins of the ongoing Hiccup-Astrid braid war. It sounded like a fun prompt, so I decided to roll with it. Then, I had another idea...I am also opening up the floor to grow this one-shot collection on a request basis. All I ask is that any requests made, A) be proposed in a PM so I have the opportunity to clarify any details asked of me and B) fall within my established continuityâ€"which mirrors the original canon closely, anyway...sort of. Having a request-based piece of work sounds horribly egotistical to me, but please know that is not where I am coming from...

I have enjoyed the overwhelming support I have received from you all, my dear readers. This is my way to give back to y'all for following me along on this crazy Hiccstrid journey. This one-shot collection gives you guys the power to request anything you feel I have left out of my stories, or that you would just like to see as more smluffy Hiccstrid indulgence. That being said, I have also invested some time into the other characters in my more recent fics. This one-shot collection is not Hiccstrid exclusive, although I have a feeling that will be the majority of the content anyway. ;) Unless you all just

surprise me with a ton of Rufflout requests. Or maybe I'll get no further requests at all, and this is just a single one-shot. It works either way.

Now, after all of that, I think it stands to reason you have to be pretty familiar with my stories to get the full enjoyment out of this fic. *shrug* That's just my advice.

I hope you enjoy! Cheers!

***_OH! There are spoilers for HTTYD2!_

**Disclaimer: **I don't own the HTTYD franchise.

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"Are you ready for this?" Astrid asked softly.

"No," Hiccup replied flatly, "but I think the more pertinent question is, 'do I have a choice?' Funny how the answer is still the same."

They bounded up the last few steps towards the Great Hall, taking them two at a time. What once would have been nearly impossible for Hiccup was hardly a challenge with his taller stature and longer legs. Their pace slowed as soon as their feet met the landing, and they lingered for a moment outside of the ornately decorated wooden doors.

Where Hiccup was about to go, Astrid could not follow. He was the Chief of Berk, and though he would undoubtedly regale her with the more interesting aspects of his meeting, he was privileged in a way she was not. Perhaps, over the years, as Hiccup imposed his more unorthodox methods of leadership, traditions and decorum would slacken to where she could assume a more equal role to him. After all, he had written her a letter once, implying his desire for such an arrangement. He had not given any recent indication that he had changed his mind, but it was his first full day on the job. Gothi had declared him the rightful successor only the day before. Hiccup was not interested in pushing his boundaries just yet.

As they hesitated to part ways, their eyes met, and Astrid could see the reluctance and insecurities concealed within his deep, viridescent eyes. Such unspoken emotion betrayed the self-confident facade he wore to bolster others' faith in him, but Astrid could see through his walls. She knew the fears and self-doubt buried there, and even fully aware of his vulnerabilities, she still believed in him. As he gazed back at her, she could not help but reflect on how much five years had changed them bothâ€”in more ways than just the physical sense.

"You'll be amazing," she told him, hooking her fingers on a strap of his flying leather, pulling him closer.

He smiled appreciatively, but it was forcedâ€”as was every fleeting moment of happiness he displayed in the wake of his father's untimely demise. He was inwardly grieving on a level Astrid could not begin to fathom.

"I love you," he said, before leaning in to kiss her forehead.

"I love you, too," she replied, reaching up for his hair as he pulled back.

"Don't," he said, easing her hand away.

"I was just going to add anotherâ€"

"It's...a one-braid kind of day."

She had been by his side when he had bathed earlier that morning, quick to initiate the game they so often played, and Hiccup had made no protest when she had twisted his auburn hair into one, small braid behind his right ear. He looked good enough with one, but for reasons she could not adequately explain, Astrid preferred her Viking with two. He usually indulged her, pretending to find the whole thing childish or irritating, as were the rules of the game, but she knew he felt quite the contrary. So, she found it peculiar that he resisted her unique gesture of tenderness.

"What's wrong?" she asked with concern, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Don't exhaust all of your affection for me before midday. I have a feeling I will be needing a lot more of it, later," he replied, kissing her fingertips.

Astrid felt her heart ache for himâ€"he was so very melancholy.

"Hiccup, Iâ€"

"Chief!" a gruff voice interrupted suddenly, making her jump.

The two of them turned to see Spitelout standing there, holding one of the double doors open impatiently. He was scowling at Hiccup with a deep-seated disapproval, and Astrid felt a twinge of anger towards the man. While Spitelout had neither said nor done anything to her, personally, Astrid felt defensive of her lover. She supposed he did not need emotional safeguardingâ€"he never did, not even in his much smaller and weaker daysâ€"but it was an inherent trait in her, eliciting an automatic response when he was challenged or threatened in her presence. Hiccup had entrusted his heart to her, and that meant more to her than just proving her love and loyalty to himâ€"his joy was her joy, and when he hurt, so did she.

"I know, Spitelout. I'll be right there," Hiccup told him, but Spitelout remained stubbornly rooted to the spot, determined to make his point with his obnoxious presence.

"Well, you know where to find me," Astrid said, releasing her hold on Hiccup. "I'll be melting Bewilderbeast ice 'til dusk."

It may have been common knowledge that the two of them were romantically involved, but there would be no loving exchanges in front of a man like Spitelout. Hiccup simply nodded and turned towards the Great Hall, passing by his uncle without the slightest acknowledgment. He glanced back over his shoulder, and Astrid gave him a bracing smile before the double doors closed completely, leaving an inexperienced young chieftain at the mercy of the older

Hooligans tribesmen, who would be ruthless in their demands and judgment of him.

Astrid sighed heavily as she descended the stone steps back towards the village proper, feeling helpless. There was very little she could do to help Hiccup carry out his new responsibilities. She was committed to doing any task he set for her to the best of her ability, if for no other reason than to make his life a little easier. Other than that, she could only help him cope with his stress once the day was done, and he sought refuge in her arms.

She would hold him, of course, and listen to his concerns and complaints. She would advise him as best she could, though she was not always the most judicious problem-solver. She would try to make him laugh, and put his worries into perspective. She would offer her sympathy and unwavering support, reassuring him of his potential and his aptitude for greatness. Then, if any twilight hours remained, she would touch him—“whichever way he needed to be touched. The possibilities ranged from more innocent caresses to the fervored exploration of his body. She would let him call the shots, though sometimes he needed a little encouragement. As part of his mild-mannered nature, he would often deny the extent of his own interest, frequently deferring to Astrid's desires in order to keep a handle on his emotions—“his self-discipline was, at times, awe-inspiring.

When she thought about it, it explained a lot—“how he could be so passionate one moment, then placid the next. Hiccup was a deep well of emotion that he had long since mastered keeping contained—“almost as if he had been born with the ability to switch his inner fire on and off, out of necessity—“channeling all of his sentiments into the very pursuits that had made him successful in life. That was why Astrid felt more concern than offense when Hiccup resisted her affections, as silly and insignificant as they might be. He could calmly play it off as indifference or exasperation, but Astrid had come to know there was usually something else at work beneath his unruffled demeanor.

Her appreciation for Hiccup's depth of feeling had begun about four years prior, when they had been lost in the height of their regrettable misunderstanding. She did not fully comprehend then, since it took years to complete the complicated puzzle that was their mutually believed-to-be unrequited love for one another. Only in retrospect did it all make sense, and the most poignant symbol of their unnecessary bitterness had been the braids in Hiccup's hair.

They had been sixteen when they had started their game, each of them only knowing half the rules—“the ones that pertained to them, alone. Astrid was one year older from when her parents had burdened her heart with a pre-arranged betrothal to Stronggut Svenson. In a desperate move to free Hiccup from the pitiful truth, she had loosened her ties to him, believing at the time the situation was inescapable. She had thought she was saving him a lot of grief, keeping him uninvolved in her personal woes as she retreated deeper into the new social circle her family had thrust upon her. She had foolishly believed it was the better option, for everyone, because she had no inkling of just how hopelessly in love with her Hiccup was—“had always been. It had perplexed her—“wounded her, even—“how callous and distant he became in response to her new persona. He

remained cordial in speech, of course, but he was abrupt, and standoffish in both body language and overall attitude.

It was selfish of her to keep seeking him out in those daysâ€”but she thought the pain was one-sided. All she knew was that she had lost Hiccup's favor, and she was desperate to get it back, unaware of the hurt her occasional nearness inflicted upon him. She wanted him desperately, even thenâ€”but she would not let him catch on. If he would not be drawn to her emotionally, she craved a closer physical proximity. So, she had invented a game for herself. With every visit she paid Hiccup, she would move closer, as if standing mere inches from him could bridge the emotional gap between them. She tested the limits to see if he would pull away, but he did not. If nothing else he seemed willing in body, though strangely bitter in spirit. Soon, even to stand beside him as he sharpened her axe, or to brush against him as she passed him in the Great Hall, was not satisfying enough. Her game had suddenly evolved into ways to touch him, though she could never seem to cultivate a good enough excuse before Hiccup would find cause to leave her presenceâ€”playing by his own set of rules she was not yet privy to.

Then, one afternoon, when she had asked him to needlessly sharpen her weapon for the second time in one week, she had an epiphanyâ€”a stroke of genius that resounded in her brain as Hiccup took the axe from her with a thinly-veiled, silent irritation in his eyes that was masked by the pleasantness in his tone of voice.

"This shouldn't take too long," he told her, before turning towards the sharpening stone.

Her eyes were transfixed on his russet hair, appearing brown in most lighting, but possessing brilliant reddish hues when caught at just the right angle by the sun's rays. He had been letting it grow outâ€”not necessarily longer, but shaggier. It was a look as untraditional as he was, but it somehow suited him perfectlyâ€”it was the excuse she had been looking for. Quickly working up the resolve, she strode up behind him, gently reaching up to run her fingers through it.

Hiccup was so startled, he dropped her axe on the sharpening stone in alarm, jerking away from her in a panic. The momentum of the spinning stone flung the axe into the ground, sparks flying.

"Careful! That axe used to belong to my mother!" Astrid scolded, placing her hands on her hips.

Hiccup ignored her reprimand, replying, "Gods! Are you trying to kill me?"

"No, but if you break that axe, I might consider it!"

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her and retrieved the weapon from the smithy floor.

"What were you doingâ€”sneaking up on me like that?" he demanded, failing to appear intimidating, even with an axe in his hand.

"I was trying to...braid your hair," Astrid answered, hoping she sounded self-assured in her delivery.

He just stared at her skeptically, and she hated it. No one could look at her in the same way he didâ€”making her feel so foolish and transparent.

"Why, in Midgard, would you want to do something like that?" he inquired, returning to work on her battle axe.

"It's just...getting kind of long," she answered, forcing her voice to sound as casual as possible.

Hiccup was quiet for a moment as he ground the blades against the stone. Astrid almost missed the quick glance that flickered in her direction before snapping back to his task.

"I'm surprised you noticed something like that," he said.

Astrid, at a loss for a reasonable response, just shrugged and watched him work. After another minute, he held up her axe, inspecting his handiwork.

"Done," he declared, handing it back to her.

"Really? That was fast."

He stared straight back at her, and Astrid almost looked away, finding it hard to maintain eye contact with him for too long.

"It was already very sharp...from the last time I worked on it," he replied.

Astrid stood there awkwardly, clutching her weapon tightly as Hiccup turned away from her, removing his smithy apron. They were both aware she was making a habit of wasting his time, but she was both too proud to admit to it and apologize, especially since she would likely be compelled to confess the reason she craved his attention in the first place. Hiccup, though he undoubtedly realized what she was doing, had his own reasons for keeping his mouth shut, acting as though he was none the wiser. Astrid would later come to understand it was because he was wrestling with his own feelings for herâ€”a desire for her to stay, even though it tormented him, but at the time, his motives were as enigmatic as ever.

As he hung his leather apron back on its peg, Astrid quietly set her axe down on an empty workbench, and approached him from behind once more. She hesitated, standing only a few inches from him, and she noticed he was frozen, tooâ€”tense in the shoulders as he sensed their physical closeness. They were both holding their breath, and Astrid did not know why he stood there, rooted in his anticipation, but she finally surrendered to her weakness. She reached up, noticing Hiccup had recently gone through a growth spurt, standing a couple inches taller than she wasâ€”he would surpass Fishlegs if he kept it up. She buried her fingertips in his hair again, quickly twisting the strands into a small braid behind his right ear. It was intoxicating to touch him, especially when fussing with a man's hair was considered a particularly affectionate gesture in their cultureâ€”she tried to play it off as anything else.

"There," she said softly, stepping back from him. "Now you look a little more like a real Viking."

Hiccup turned around and stroked the braid thoughtfully for a moment, and Astrid found herself finding his new decoration appealingâ€”he ultimately decided that he did not.

"I don't need braids to be a Viking," he responded, frowning.

Much to her disappointment, he undid the braid with a few deft moves of his fingers, and she tried not to appear too crestfallen.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked flatly, picking up her axe.

"Not a thing. The same as always."

For all of his subtle annoyance at her repeated, pointless visits, he never charged her anything for his services in the smithy. She could have dismissed his generosity as a sort of "formerly friends" discount, but she knew he did not extend the same benefits to the other teens, with whom he was still on good termsâ€”Tuffnut and Snotlout complained about it often enough.

"Thanks," she muttered, briskly striding towards the exit of the shop.

"Anytime," she heard him say, though the dullness in his voice suggested he felt otherwise.

That had been the inception of their braid war. It should have been easy to take the hint that Hiccup did not want to be touchedâ€”least of all, by her. Of course, he would confess to her a couple years later that every fiber of his being screamed for her, and perhaps that was why the course of their battle for his hair began to change.

For the most part, they continued to avoid one another, until Astrid's selfishness got the better of her, and her barely repressed need for him brought them crashing back together in a confusing, emotionally painful jumble of hormones, and mutual denial of the sexual tension that was so retrospectively obvious. She made her excuses to her intended, telling Stronggut she had a mounting list of chores, or some dragon-related business in which he had no interest. To Hiccup, she spun small white lies about places to go and things to do, which had caused their paths to fortuitously cross. He would listen politely, and smile occasionallyâ€”if he could force itâ€”then quickly blurt out an urgent concern that required him to be just about anywhere else than trapped in an awkward conversation with her. He would turn to flee, but not before Astrid offered to braid his hairâ€”though, it was more a declaration of what she was about to do, instead of a bid for permission.

"I told you before, Astrid," he said wearily as she cornered him on the bridge to the academy, "I don't need a braid to be more of a Viking."

"I know that," she said, quickly twisting his hair into place before he got it in his mind to pull away. "I was teasing before."

"Then why do you keep doing it?" he asked, bemused.

"Because it looks good on you," she answered.

"I have no one I'm trying to impress," he had lied.

She had hurried on her way as soon as she completed her handiwork, temporarily satisfied by even their terse exchanges if it meant she got to put her hands on him. Hiccup continued on towards the academy, and Astrid longed for the days not so long past when she worried about nothing else but the foolishness of the other teensâ€”how she missed that simplicity.

As she reached the end of the bridge, she turned to cast one last parting glance at the true object of her affection. She saw Hiccup reach up to undo the braid in his hair, as he always did, but he paused, fingers poised. Then, to her amazement, he dropped his hand to his side and let it be just as he disappeared from her sight. She was surprised at the surge of happiness that rippled through her over something as paltry as a braidâ€”but it meant, to her, that Hiccup was accepting some small piece of her.

Over the course of the next year, however, she came to realize just how wrong she had been in her analysis. Far from warming up to her, Hiccup only became more closed off. Even his irritation with her gave way to a sort of kindhearted apathy and mild neglectâ€”she would have preferred his aggravation to the aloofness, because she had at least recognized him in it. She continued to braid his hair whenever she saw him, provided he had not left the previous one in place. He had started to wear the braids she made as a regular part of his everyday appearance. While it used to please her to see it, she could not help but feel he retained them to ward off unnecessary physical contact. There were less opportunities to touch him the more he sported her decorations.

"I thought you hated the braid," she said to him one evening as she passed him in the Great Hall during supper.

She stopped for a moment to tug at it pointedlyâ€”one more excuse to toy with him. He glanced up at her with a calm, neutral expression that Astrid wished would betray even the slightest reaction to her presence. Her heart fluttered whenever he looked at her, and she silently cursed its weakness for the one person she could never haveâ€”the one person she wanted more than anything else in all off the realms of existence. He was seventeen and a month older than she was. He was taller, tooâ€”the tallest of all of the teens in her former circle of friends. How unexpected _that _change had been. His features had matured, too. He was more of a man than he was that awkward, scrawny, gangly boy that had stolen her heart with one romantic flight on the back of his Night Fury.

"I gave up fighting you a while ago," he replied. "You were just going to keep doing it, so now you don't have to be bothered."

Oh, but how she wanted to be bothered. In a pathetic excuse to prolong their conversation, she twisted a second braid behind his ear and a familiar exasperation spread across his face.

"You are relentless," he said, with a heavy sighâ€”a blunt observation devoid of humor or sarcasm.

Astrid opened her mouth to say somethingâ€”to tell him she would stop if he came right out and asked her toâ€”but her husband-to-be beckoned her over from the next table, and she had no excuse to

linger with the young man who wanted nothing to do with her. She did not care what opinions other Hooligans had of her—she had heard it all. She was too tough, too mean, too boyish, but none of those criticisms hurt like the wordless rejection from Hiccup, who was so warm and open to just about anyone else.

Stronggut had tried to reassure her, in his pompous way, that her former friend was just too shallow and self-absorbed to waste another thought on, and she was better off focusing all of her time and energy on him, instead. Astrid found herself thinking she had never heard a more inaccurate judgment of Hiccup's character. Furthermore, she could no sooner forget him than she could disown Stormfly, or take up needlepoint as her new, favorite pastime. She just did not have it in her, so she settled for one-sided pining, completely unaware that Hiccup was suffering just as much as she was, if not, moreso. How stupid they both had been, caught up in their own misery to notice one another's pain. How many intimate moments were lost because they were too busy keeping their talks brief and empty of all significant feelings? The only meaningful touch that connected them was the hasty braiding of his hair that was both fleeting in duration, and enduring as a reminder of their separation, as long as Hiccup kept them in place to keep her needy fingers at bay.

Relief was not a powerful enough word to express what came over her when they had finally given in to their desires a year later. It had been an inevitable thing—as deeply in love as they were—indescribable in its perfection and magnitude. Every kiss and caress from Hiccup was a healing force that she could not take for granted. Her fingers slid through his hair, no longer in an act of desperation, but rather a gesture of tenderness and yearning.

"You still wear those braids," she had mused one night, as they lay tangled up in his blankets—they were both freshly nineteen.

"Because you still put them there," he replied.

She was laying on top of him, naked, as his hands wandered up and down the contours of her back.

"Besides, they grew on me," he admitted.

"Oh? Is that why you roll your eyes whenever I make a new one?" she teased.

"No. I roll my eyes because I can't believe that I actually like them."

"They really do suit you," she said, gently pulling on one. "I think they can stay."

Hiccup laughed softly and Astrid smiled at the sound.

"I'm glad they meet your approval, considering you have been obsessive about them for the past few years."

"Actually I was obsessive about touching you," she confessed. "You were always so far away."

He reached up and traced her hairline with his fingertips, and a small

shudder of pleasure coursed through her.

"No. I was always here, but we were both too stubborn and proud," he said, sliding his hand around to the base of her skull.

"What! _Vikings? _Stubborn and proud?" she replied sarcastically, and he grinned.

He then applied gentle pressure to the back of her head, and their lips came together instantly—it never took much.

The rest of that night was tucked away in her precious collection of memories she prayed would never fade, even though there were more evenings like it than not. They were so comfortable together—their intimacy was natural and effortless. Around the village they tried to maintain a standard of propriety, since they were not yet wed and more traditional souls were sensitive to such things. Under the scrutinizing gaze of others, they settled for little more than brief kisses, innocent touches, and, of course, the occasional braiding of Hiccup's hair—if one or more braids were needed, and Astrid felt particularly affectionate.

What was once a bittersweet moment of selfish indulgence had become an enduring display of tenderness unique to their particular circumstances. Not only did braiding his hair serve to satisfy a mutual need for physical closeness in the presence of others, when certain desires could not be pursued, it also communicated so much about where they had once been, and how far they had come. It was such a crucial aspect of their nonverbal expressions of love, that Astrid was compelled to do it even in their private moments, as well as toying with his braids, if they were already in place. It was a much more satisfying game they played, ever since they had both come to fully understand the rules.

Astrid had to constantly check herself from daydreaming as she went about ridding Berk of the towering shards of ice Drago's Bewilderbeast had left behind. It was too easy to let her mind wander down the path of reminiscence as she poured hours into the tedious work—chipping away at the shards while Stormfly contributed with all her firepower. She had welcomed the sunset when it arrived, signaling the end to the seemingly endless day, giving her, and her Nadder, a much needed break. Her muscles ached from the repetitive swinging of a war hammer against the resolute pillars of ice that had transformed her village into a twisted, unfamiliar landscape.

She trudged her way towards Hiccup's house, rolling her right shoulder, which was feeling particularly taxed. She saw no sign of Cloudjumper as she approached, indicating that he and Valka were likely elsewhere doing...well, whatever it was they did. She seized the chance to slip into the Haddock household without worry of any awkward, uncomfortable attempts at bonding with Hiccup's very peculiar mother. Stormfly curled up by the hearth patiently, undoubtedly waiting for Toothless, whom she had grown rather fond of as a playmate and companion.

"Good girl," she cooed, stroking Stormfly's snout. "Stay."

The Nadder rested her head, closing her eyes peacefully as she awaited the Night Fury's return. Astrid, meanwhile, hurried upstairs to Hiccup's bedroom. It was rather humble compared to his father's

room, as Hiccup had described itâ€”a bed chamber built for a Chiefâ€”but he refused to move down to the first floor. He had given the bedroom to his mother, insisting it was her home, and it had been their marital bedâ€”though Astrid suspected it had more to do with the lingering presence of his father's memory than Hiccup cared to admit.

She flopped down on his bed, burrowing into the pillow and blankets that smelled so much like him. It was a comforting scent that lulled her to sleep before she even had the chance to put up a fight. Only when she was awoken by gentle pressure in the bed beside her did she realize she had even drifted off.

"Hiccup?" she murmured, rubbing her eyes groggily.

He set a candle on the small table beside his bed.

"I thought you had gone homeâ€”that you had grown tired of waiting for me," he said. "Imagine my pleasant surprise when I walk in my front door to find Stormfly curled up in front of the hearth."

She sat up and hugged him tightly.

"Like I would be anywhere else," she replied.

He kissed the top of her head, and Astrid gazed up at him intently.

"Was it as bad today as you thought it would be?" she asked.

His smile faltered and he answered, "And then some..."

Astrid frowned and ran her fingertips through his hair. It hurt to see him so defeated. He had so often been her pillar of support, and yet Astrid felt completely ill-equipped to return the favor, in light of recent events.

"Sounds like a two-braid kind of night," she said, hoping to inject some humor into his somber mood.

To her relief, he gave a small chuckle and replied, "I suppose it is."

He sat still for a moment as Astrid twisted strands of his hair into a second braid, though she was much slower with it than usualâ€”taking her time.

"It will get easier," she whispered, though she knew it was an unfounded claim with no guarantees to substantiate it.

Hiccup just sighed heavily, neither agreeing with nor refuting her reassurance. His typical optimism had been in short supply in the aftermath of all the tragedy.

"I know it's hard," Astrid continued, as she finished up the braid, "but at least you'll look good doing it."

She gave his braid a small tug for good measure and Hiccup broke out into the first genuine smile she had seen on his face since he had assumed his father's mantle.

"Thank the gods for you, then," he said playfully, running his hand over the braids Astrid had so lovingly provided him.

She beamed, glad that grief worked on a continuum. She would help him through it, holding fast to the occasional breakthrough happiness that Hiccup felt.

It was such a silly thing, to think two small braids could ever have any kind of symbolism, but there were stranger things in the world. It connected themâ€"whatever ridiculous game of back and forth affection played out in his hair. It was just another piece of their history that they were not keen on letting go of anytime soon. After all, why would they? They had been through so muchâ€"suffered through so much. Whether it had been their own doing was beside the point. They would continue their little braid warâ€"though Hiccup had long since yieldedâ€"as long as they had the need for any and all forms of physical closeness.

"It's like you're carrying a little piece of me with you," she teased.

It was her new, favorite excuseâ€"she felt it was much more convincing than the white lies she used to spin that were born from a place of desperation and self-pity.

"Then I surrender to your hands," he replied. "The gods know how badly I could have used you today."

They shared a tender kiss, momentarily forgetting all the stresses of the world outside that cozy little room.

As they broke apart, Hiccup added, "If that's what it takes to remind me of how near you are..."

He lovingly tugged at the end of her own flaxen braid for emphasis.

"Astrid, don't ever stop touching me."

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****Author's Note: ****First one-shot of who knows how many, written for The Wolf Raven. I have enjoyed our PMs, my friend. I hope this satisfied your request! :) I hoped I managed to make braiding hair romantic. I gave it my best shot!

*****PS-** If you are going to make a request of me, please, please, please do not ask for a Hiccstrid engagement/wedding fic. That would be jumping ahead of my timeline. We're just not there yet, dear readers.

2. Awkward Introductions

****Author's Note: ****Yay! Requests have been coming in! That makes me so happyâ€"this one-shot collection...project...thingymajigger won't fall flat on its face, after all. I will honor requests in the order in which I have received and/or agreed to do them. I love the opportunity to break from the long, plot-driven stories every now and

then. My brain needs a reprieve to write the occasional entertaining oneshot. I am prone to writer's block from time to timeâ€"which is very frustrating when I haven't updated one of my major stories in like...3 weeks. I always want to write. Once in a while, I just need to tackle something different.

Also, coincidentally enough, most of y'all's requests center around Astrid. I find this very intriguing. Hmmm.

Also, alsoâ€" these oneshots are not necessarily linear. They won't jump ahead of my main timeline (currently 2 weeks post-HTTYD2 in This Is All Just Part Of the Grieving Process), but they aren't in any particular order. Some will be/contain flashbacks of pre-HTTYD canon, the 5-year gap between films in which the majority of my stories reside, and...well...there you go. I will try to give specifics about when each particular oneshot takes place along my continuity so there's not too much "Huh, what?"

****Disclaimer: **Blah.**

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Astrid was Hiccup's biggest, most outspoken supporter. That was an undeniable fact. While she never hesitated to voice her contrary opinion, or question his logic when she deemed it necessary, she was the first and the loudest to sing his praises and rise to his defense in the face of others' unwarranted doubt and criticism. He was not infallible, by any means, but she believed in himâ€"in his intelligence, his wisdom, and his wealth of yet-to-be-tapped potential. His triumphs filled her with so much pride and adoration, as his lover, that she thought she might burst when he knelt before Gothi to claim his birthright and succeed his father as Chief of Berk. He had resisted the idea at first, lamenting to her about his insecurities, and lack of direction and identity that made him unworthy of the job in his own mindâ€"but in spite of all his trials and tribulations during the preceding hours, as he rose to his feet again, he shone as brilliantly as any star in the night sky.

He had turned to face his people, who stared back at him with a mixture of admiration, hope, and uncertainty for the future. Hiccup, who was usually so calm and mild-mannered, was alight with a resolve that burned deep within him.

"I am your Chief. It is with a sense of humility and duty that I accept this honor," he told his tribe firmly. He balled his hand into a fist and laid it over his heart, adding, "I vow to tirelessly serve Berk to the best of my ability. _Odin, far-wanderer, grant me wisdom, courage, and victory. Friend Thor, grant me your strength, and both be with me."*_

Every Hooligan present responded together, in prayer, "_So may mild Powers help you, Frigg and Freyja, and many a god_." **

Hiccup wasted no time from that moment on, gathering Gobber, Spitelout, and other knowledgable men of Berk, to delegate and divide the daunting task of restoring their sturdy village to its former state. The group of them had quickly made their way towards the Great Hall to collaborate, but not before Hiccup tested his new, uncontested power. Astrid had stood by and watched as he issued his first commandsâ€"he was confident in his ideas, but not in his

authority. It was as uncomfortable for the older Vikings to receive and abide by Hiccup's orders as it was for Hiccup to give them, since they had looked down on him for most of his life. Viking chieftains were supposed to be broad and burly, and Hiccup was a far cry from the traditional Chief that commanded respect. Berk was in a state of upheaval, and it would be a time of transition for everyone—a new leader, mass rebuilding, and an influx of strange, new dragons to mind. Hiccup's ascension to Chief of Berk was just a temporary high that would soon be consumed by the vacuum of power following Stoick's death. Astrid could see the impending conflict in the hesitancy with which the older Hooligans heeded their young, new Chief's orders. Still, the entire tribe was united in the common interest of rebuilding their homes and livelihoods. As long as that remained true, Astrid anticipated Hiccup would meet little opposition. At least, not at first. It would come, inevitably—but not until he had exhausted all efforts to make Berk whole again. She predicted that the dissenting voices would not hesitate to make themselves heard, once things had returned to a somewhat normal state.

Stormfly squawked suddenly beside her, snapping her out of her reverie with an unpleasant jolt—her dragon was often clueless as to how loud she could be.

"What is it, girl?" she asked, patting her dragon's side in a soothing manner.

The Nadder just fidgeted excitedly, gaze transfixed on the large house atop a familiar hill, silhouetted against the fading glow of the last, few retreating bands of sunlight. The front door was slightly ajar, and a soft, inviting golden glimmer of candlelight beckoned Astrid into the warmth and refuge of the loving arms that awaited her inside. Stormfly, on the other hand, was simply missing her favorite playmate.

"C'mon," she murmured to her Nadder.

They hurried towards the Haddock household—it was more "home" to Astrid during the past two years than the one she grew up in. The reason was obvious, of course, and she was willing to wager she would feel comfortable in a damp sea cave if Hiccup was there, beside her. Her parents had stopped asking questions about where she spent so many nights, and why—they were not terribly interested in the details. Her father was particularly determined to avoid extensive discussion on the subject, since it was far easier on him to claim ignorance. It had been a wise decision on their part, since Astrid could not, and would not, resist Hiccup—she was drawn to him by powers far beyond her control.

As she reached the threshold of his house, throwing open the door, she noticed Stormfly suddenly hesitated, lingering nervously outside. She turned back to reassure her dragon, but Stormfly would not budge. Astrid furrowed her brow in confusion, finding her Nadder's behavior peculiar, but as she moved to step inside, she nearly ran face first into an unfamiliar dragon with its head tilted so far to the side in a way that just looked painful. Blocking the doorway was Valka's sizeable dragon—a Stormcutter, Hiccup had told her—protectively standing watch against unwelcome intrusions while simultaneously stripping Astrid of the unfettered access to the Haddock household she regularly enjoyed.

"I was expecting a different dragon..." she murmured weakly, backing away.

The Stormcutter twisted its head back in an upright position as it considered her curiously, and Astrid felt her own head tilt to the side in bemusement. Four wings and all the cranial mobility of an owl—it was strangely fitting that Hiccup's mother would possess a dragon as rare and unique as Toothless was. After all, even Stoick the Vast had ridden the only Rumblehorn on Berk. Apparently, distinct dragon species was a Haddock thing.

"Is someone out there?" she heard Valka call from inside the house.

"It's...it's just me," Astrid replied awkwardly, immediately realizing that it did very little to distinguish herself from any other young woman on Berk. She added, "Astrid Hofferson. I'm...uh...well, Hiccup and I are sort of..."

She trailed off at the sound of approaching footsteps, and the Stormcutter's expression suddenly softened as it tucked its head beneath two of its wings to gaze at its rider.

"It's alright, Cloudjumper," she heard Valka reassure the dragon. "I believe she is a friend."

Cloudjumper. Astrid committed the name to memory.

"I apologize if he startled you," Valka said as her dragon scaled the house's facade to dutifully return to his watchful perch on the roof—"Astrid had been so caught up in her own musings to have noticed the dragon before. "Twenty years of thinking other humans were the enemy has left us both a bit wary of new faces, I'm afraid."

Suddenly, Astrid was standing face-to-face with Hiccup's mother whom she, and everyone else, had long assumed was dead. It was like meeting a ghost, and Astrid did not know what to say, or how to properly address a woman as mysterious and feral as Valka—a complete stranger whom she had only heard about in the wistful reminiscings of Stoick, or her absence occasionally counted among Hiccup's regrets. She was a tall, fierce-looking woman molded by two decades of an untamed living, which would have made her intimidating if it were not for the subtle softness in her eyes that she had passed on to her son. She was beautiful in the way she was so wild, and yet oddly well-kempt.

"It's okay," Astrid said quickly. "I'm sorry for the intrusion. I was just...I'm going to..."

She took another step backward, towards Stormfly, gesturing behind her in no particular direction.

"If it's Hiccup you're looking for, he's still up at the Great Hall, as far as I know," Valka said. "But you are welcome to wait inside. I don't bite."

Astrid cast a quick glance at Stormfly, internally debating the merits of fleeing on her dragon, opposed to potentially being caught in an uncomfortable silence with Hiccup's long lost mother—but upon

further contemplation, she reasoned Valka was to become a permanent presence in her life, if she indeed intended to stay on Berk with her son. Astrid knew it would serve her well to make a real effort to get to know the woman. Perhaps, to her pleasant surprise, they would enjoy an enlightening conversation that drew them closer together? One could only hope.

"Thank you," she said as she accepted Valka's invitation, stepping over the threshold.

The two of them retreated indoors, followed by Stormfly, and Astrid felt a sensation of comfort wash over as she took a seat at the table. She was at peace in the Chief's household, probably more so than Valka, despite the fact it was the home Stoick had built for her.

"With everything that has happened over the past two days, I don't think we've been properly introduced," Valka said, sitting down across from Astrid.

In spite of her two decades-long cohabitation with wild dragons, Valka spoke rather eloquently, and carried herself with an air of dignity. Astrid suspected she had been of a higher social status during her years on Berk—it made sense, considering she had been courted by the Chief. Not that Stoick was bound to marry a highbred woman—or, as highly bred as Vikings could be—but as a traditional soul, it made sense he would have been attracted to such manners.

"It's been a mess," Astrid replied. "I think it's understandable."

Valka smiled, and Astrid could see traces of Hiccup in it—he had certainly taken after his mother.

"My name is Valka—but I suspect you already knew that?"

"Yes," Astrid answered.

It was a short answer, bordering on rude, but she did not know how to elaborate without dredging up painful memories for the older woman. Everyone in Berk knew her name, for Stoick had mourned her for years—privately, of course, with an impassive exterior as he continued to carry out his duties as Chief. But, those who knew him well, like the Hofferson clan, had been aware of his heartache—as much as a man like him would show it. Astrid had been much too young at the time to remember her former Chief as anything but tough and unbreakable, but her parents had occasionally spoken about the depths his grief as part of the select few who had been privileged enough to know the true extent of it. Astrid suspected Stoick had never fully healed—how could a man move past such a tragedy when he had been so deeply in love? Astrid would not speak of it in Valka's presence, however. She did not want to be responsible for placing any feelings of guilt on the other woman, nor was it really her place to reveal such personal details about a man who could no longer speak up for himself.

"You are Astrid, am I right?" Valka asked.

"Yes—and that's Stormfly," she answered, nodding towards her

dragon.

"Such a beautiful Deadly Nadder," Valka cooed, and Stormfly growled appreciatively.

"She knows it, too," Astrid replied with a smile, "but she's tough when it counts."

"She suits you."

Astrid was not entirely sure what Valka meant, but she assumed she was being complimented.

"Thanks?" she said, uncertainly. "Y'know, if it wasn't for Hiccup, there was a time where I might've killed her. Now, I can't imagine my life without her. How things have changed in five years..."

"For the better, no doubt," Valka replied firmly, and Astrid would not have dared argued even if she had disagreedâ€"thankfully, they shared the same opinion on Berk's radical transformation. "I never would have thought it possible."

Astrid frowned, feeling a little defensive, latching on to Valka's hidden accusation.

"We may be a stubborn tribe of Vikings, but we aren't completely dense. We just needed some proof that dragons were more than the mindless killing machines we thought they were. Until Hiccup met Toothless, we had no evidence that they were anything else."

Valka scoffed and retorted, "Because everyone was so caught up in their violent ways, they were blind to the obvious truth, staring them in the face."

"At that point in time, it was kind of hard to be sympathetic towards the same animals that had been killing our loved ones for generations," Astrid argued.

"You're defending the old ways?"

"No, but I understand how things got so bad."

Valka waved her hand dismissively, and Astrid clenched her fists irritably in her lap.

"It was a horrible way to live. So much senseless bloodshed. How many thousands of dragons were needlessly slaughteredâ€"?"

"How many people were needlesslyâ€"?"

"â€"That is why I left. How could I stay? I never believed Berk could be anything different."

"Hiccup believed. He stayed."

A heavy silence descended between them and Astrid stared determinedly down at the table, feeling her heart pounding in her ears as she sensed Valka's eyes boring into her. She regretted the tense turn in their conversation, but she could not empathize with Valka's sentiments about Berk, and the way their tribe had lived. It had been

the wrong way, of courseâ€”a woeful misunderstanding between dragons and Vikings alikeâ€”but their people had not been the heartless monsters, full of bloodlust, Valka seemed to think they had once been. Given their limited knowledge about dragons at that time, how could she have expected them to behave any different? She judged them too harshlyâ€”one glaring difference between her and Hiccup, despite their striking physical similarities, and the unparalleled connection to dragons they shared.

"I can see why he fancies you," Valka spoke up suddenly, shattering their uncomfortable silence.

Astrid glanced up, expecting to meet her condemnation, but she was caught off-guard by her look of amused curiosity, instead.

"Iâ€”What?" she inquired, dumbfounded by the other woman's blunt assessment.

"You're intelligent _and_ beautifulâ€”two traits that are a rare combination in this world," Valka replied. "The way Hiccup looks at you...Stoick used to look at me that way, too. Are you his intended?"

Astrid felt her face burnâ€”twenty years without regular human interaction had apparently dulled Valka's sense of propriety in polite conversation. She was not prepared to delve into her relationship with Hiccup with his mother. There were details that Valka, practically a stranger, simply did not need to know. To discuss such sentimental things with her future mother-in-law, whom she barely even knew, went far beyond the bounds of normalcy, and she found herself wishing she had left with Stormfly while she had the opportunity.

"I'm justâ€”We're not...engaged," she murmured, wishing she had a tankard of ale, or _something_ to occupy her fidgeting handsâ€”she settled for drumming her fingertips on her knees.

Valka's eyebrows rose in mild surprise.

"I had just assumed by the way he kissed you today..."

Of course. When Valka still lived on Berk, arranged marriages and rigid standards of courtship were commonplace. She did not knowâ€”while promiscuity and premarital sex were still widely frowned upon, though ineffectively deterredâ€”dating had become a far more relaxed, informal affair in recent years.

"We're _are_ together, and have been for a while," Astrid responded boldlyâ€”since Valka wanted to be direct.

"Well, I suppose that explains things," the older woman replied.

"It does."

There came another awkward lull in their conversation, and Astrid began thinking of polite ways to excuse herself from the Haddock household altogether. They had been talking long enough for her to conclude that she liked Hiccup's strange mother well enough, but she was not fond of their one-on-one chatâ€”she had no desire to continue

with it unless Hiccup was present to moderate.

"May I ask you something?" Valka inquired, and Astrid was instantly filled with foreboding.

'No' was what she wanted to say, but she doubted Hiccup would take kindly to unnecessary rudeness towards his mother.

She hesitantly answered, "Go ahead."

Valka was quite for a moment, brow furrowed in deep thought. Hiccup often made the same expression, and Astrid was struck by a sudden need to hold him. As Valka began to speak however, Astrid's desire for her lover was overtaken by a sadness, and pity for his mother. The side of her that she had buried deep within her heart for two decades as she chose the freedom and well-being dragons over her deep-seated maternal instincts. Astrid could not imagine what had possessed her to make such a choice, but as convicted as she may have been, it must have still tormented her. Gnawing at the woman she had once been, and had tried to cast aside for her new cause. Yet, that woman had remained there. The wife and mother. Lingering beneath the surface all along, only just recently beginning to reemerge.

"I missed the last twenty years of my son's life," Valka said softly, "and not a day went by that I did not think of him. Missing him. I thought, if Berk could not change, his life would be easier if I was no longer around to shame our family."

Such a confession further humanized her in Astrid's eyes.

"What I want to know," she continued, "is that it was worth it. Did Hiccup have the childhood I wished for him. One that made him happy and want for nothing? If I know he had an easy time as a boy, I can finally make peace with the decision I made."

Astrid took a deep breath, feeling her heart drop into the pit of her stomach. She did not know how to answer that question. That ardent desire for the truth, and for validation the other woman would not find with the words Astrid could not bring herself to speak. It was unfair for Valka to put her in that position. She could not be the one to crush a mother's hope that had given her purpose and justification for the past twenty years. Astrid would not do it. It was not a question that was meant for her. If Valka needed to know how her absence had impacted Hiccup's life, she was going to have to ask him directly.

"Listen..." Astrid began, apprehensively. "but the gods saw fit to be kind to her."

The front door flew open, making both women jump, and Toothless bounded in, immediately rousing Stormfly for some friendly wrestling. Astrid leapt to her feet and out of the path of a wayward tail.

"Okay! Okay!" she heard Hiccup say loudly.

Her heart gave its usual joyful flutter as he stepped inside, looking exasperated. The dragons' playful scuffle threatened to overturn and demolish any unfortunate furniture that got in the way, and the day had seemed to rob Hiccup of his patience.

"Not in the house. Take it outside!" he demanded.

He quickly stepped aside as the dragons bolted past him into the night, and he shut the door behind them with a weary sigh.

"If our dragons can't control themselves, I'm going to have to..." he trailed off as he noticed both his girlfriend and his mother at the same table—it was apparently just as peculiar a concept to him as it had been to Astrid. "This is...unexpected."

He lingered by the doorway, indecisive over which of the women in his life required his immediate attention. It was a new dynamic in Astrid's relationship with him—to consider his mother and the role she would play in his life. His eyes flickered between the two of them, but Astrid would not have held it against him if he went to Valka. In fact, part of her wanted him to seek out that missing aspect of his childhood, but it was quickly silenced by a thinly veiled jealousy at the thought of anyone else taking priority over her. She knew it was a catty attitude to have—it was his mother, for gods' sake! He had longed for her love his entire life, and Astrid assumed he would easily become wrapped up in the novelty of it, and he could not be faulted for that—but it was Hiccup, and he did things contrary to what was expected of him.

To her surprise, he simply nodded at Valka and softly said, "Mom."

Then, without further hesitation, he strode over to Astrid and kissed her forehead before pulling her into his arms. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly, basking in his love for her as Valka studied them curiously. When it came to their chaste displays of affection, innocent enough in nature, Hiccup was not shy about it—he did not care who saw them simply embrace, or share a quick kiss, and Astrid adored his lack of reservation about it. After all, he had wanted her so desperately for many long, frustrating years, and he was not about to deny his desire for her beyond what was socially acceptable.

"How did it go today?" Astrid asked him softly, reveling in the sensation of his hands dropping to her slender waist.

"It was alright, but I feel everyone was just being generous, and cooperative for no other reason than to give me a break, considering..."

He could not finish the thought, but he did not have to. Astrid knew his father's death had to be on the forefront of his mind. How could it not be?

"I guess some things never change," Valka said. "Stoick used to complain about his early years as Chief, and all of the criticisms and nagging of the village elders."

She recalled the memory with a fondness. Coping with the her husband's demise by focusing on his life, instead. Astrid supposed it made sense, when Valka had nothing of Stoick to hold on to but fading recollections of what must have seemed like another lifetime, when they were different, happier people—she could more readily disconnect from the sorrow of the present and retreat into the

comforting past. Hiccup, however, was just not there yet, and his mother was unaware of how mentioning the former Chief was hurting her son. Clearly, inherited traits were not enough to bridge twenty years of physical and emotional absence. She could love Hiccup deeply, and relate to his affinity for dragons, but she did not know him. He was more than her son and fellow dragon rider, and Valka had not yet come to understand.

"It's a nice night, Hiccup," Astrid said casually. "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow at her suggestion, but as she continued to stare back at him pointedly, the realization dawned on his face. He then flashed her a small, tired smile that was a brave, yet disingenuous stab at contentment in the face of inner turmoil—he was transparent to her alone.

"That sounds amazing," he replied.

"This late, when you just got home?" Valka asked curiously.

"It's alright," he told his mother reassuringly. "This is Berk, and I am the Master of Dragons. Who would mess with this much Viking?"

Astrid stifled the burst of laughter that threatened to spill from her lips, while Valka appeared extremely bemused—she was unaccustomed to Hiccup's self-deprecating brand of dry sarcasm.

"I'm sorry. I should have prepared you for how...different mom is," he murmured under his breath as they slipped out the front door, finding it oddly more private outside the Haddock household. "With all the insanity, I just didn't have the time to properly introduce you to her."

Astrid hoped that sneaking off into the shadows would not become their new normal with Valka's return.

"You had to get it from somewhere, right?" she replied, playfully nudging him in the arm.

"Yes. I guess it does shed some light on the origin of my more unusual idiosyncracies," he said. "I hope you didn't find her to be completely off-putting."

Astrid just grinned and stated, "I don't think I'll be seeking any quality time with her right now, but I like her just fine, considering she's not the most adept at polite conversation."

"Well, it's been a few years."

"Maybe that's just one of her idiosyncracies?"

"A trait I guess I missed out on, when you think that I have half of her—" "

"That's not true," Astrid interrupted.

Hiccup stopped walking and stared at her quizzically.

"I don't think you're half of her, or half of your father. If anything, you've inherited a quarter of each them, at most," she explained. "The other half of youâ€”the more outstanding half, in my opinionâ€”is a man entirely of your own invention."

Hiccup mulled over her words for a moment, then he reached out to her, and she gladly slid into his arms once more.

"How can you possibly know me _that_ wellâ€”to make that sort of assessment with confidence?" he asked, frowning.

"Because, Hiccup," she began, "I've been around for the twenty years it takes to figure you out."

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****Author's Note:**** Satisfying another request from The Wolf Raven for a meaningful Astrid-Valka introduction, which happened to be my second request, ever. Yay! This was a fun exercise in characterization for meâ€”in regards to Valka, anyway. I mean, we haven't seen any of her or Eret outside the events of HTTYD2 to provide more insight into their characters...sooooo I'm just kind of working with what little we _do_ know. I hope it works and is in character as much as it can be. I imagine thatâ€”while not completely socially awkwardâ€”Valka's not great with small talk and pleasantries. It's been about 20 years since she had any real practice at it.

There was more to this author's note but my editor made me delete it because he thinks I talk to my fans too much. Lol

E. Wills, out! *mic drop*

3. The Very Last Piece

****Author's Note: ****Yay, an update! It's a miracle! I know I said there would be no rhyme or reason to when I updated, but it's been a while, and I just feel so bad about it. I haven't forgotten y'all's requests. I have returned to make a little more progress on the list.

This oneshot takes place shortly before the events of HTTYD2 and after my fic, This Maddening EndrÃ¼aga.

****Disclaimer****: I don't own the HTTYD franchise.

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If there was one thing Astrid had come to know about her relationship with Hiccup, above all else, it was that Toothless was an integral part of it. One simply did not get close to the young man without going through his dragon, first. It had been that way from the beginningâ€”from the day she had stalked him to cove. She only sought to interrogate him and learn the secret behind his unnatural success in the arena. She would have never imagined that the weak, mild-mannered, and unassuming village embarrassment tamed a dragonâ€”much less, a Night Fury. More shocking still was the dragon's protective behavior. She could not get close to Hiccup while Toothless deemed her a threat. It was that day that everything she

ever knew or believed about dragons was turned on its headâ€”and she could not be more thankful for it.

Hiccup's bond with Toothless had been the key to everythingâ€”Berk's transformation, the enduring peace their people enjoyed, and more importantly, Astrid's relationship with him. Had it not been for the Night Fury, no Viking would have ever come to know what amazing creatures dragons truly were, and their village would have continued in archaic and misguided ways. Astrid would have likely continued to treat Hiccup as if he was invisible, and Snotlout would be better positioned to succeed Stoick as Chiefâ€”a thought which made her nauseous. Indeed, life on Berk was infinitely better with dragons as their companions, rather than mortal enemies, and Hiccup and Toothless were responsible for all of it.

It had not been an instant change, however. Even her friendship with Hiccup had gone through its own initial evolution. Dragons were their first common interest, and with his help, she forged a deep, lasting bond with Stormfly. She appreciated him for itâ€”had come to greatly respect him, even. The new amiability that existed between them was a pleasant change, and perhaps, that was why Toothless was so tolerant of her growing need to get close to Hiccup.

The dragon was wary around others for a whileâ€”keeping a watchful eye on his human as he spoke to everyone from the Twins to his own father. Toothless' protective instincts were exacerbated by Hiccup's amputation in those first few days of the rough, and uncomfortable adjustment. While not aggressive, the Night Fury was inherently mistrusting of anyone he deemed unfamiliar or suspect. He had been aware of the difficulties between Hiccup and the rest of Berkâ€”dragons were so eerily perceptiveâ€”and it had taken a few weeks before Toothless was completely relaxed around others. Astrid had been an exception, however. From the first flight she and Hiccup had shared, the dragon seemed generally accepting of her. She could speak with Hiccupâ€”playfully punch him, tooâ€”and Toothless seemed unperturbed by any, and all, peculiar expressions of friendly affection. It was more uncomfortable for Astrid to adapt to the ever-present black sentinel that kept watch over Hiccup, even though she swore to herself there were no ulterior motives for hovering around the boy.

How naive she had been at the time. In all honesty, Toothless probably knew more of her feelings for Hiccup than she was prepared to admit to herself, all those years ago. Even during the regrettable three years of distance and bitterness between her and Hiccup, Toothless had always shown her more warmth than Hiccup ever didâ€”probably because the dragon was not the one who was so brokenhearted. Though the Night Fury was invested in his human's physical and emotional well being, the dragon could sense who truly meant Hiccup harm. While her actions had torn a rift between them for those three long years, Astrid could not deny she still loved himâ€”and for Toothless, that was good enough to forgive the blonde of her mistakes.

It went both ways, however. As dedicated a companion and body guard as the Night Fury was, Hiccup was equally committed to the dragon's well being. Until he and Astrid had succumbed to their feelings for one another, she would have bet all she owned that there was nothing Hiccup loved or cherished more than Toothless. No matter how tight a bond any other Hooligan developed with a dragon, it paled when

compared to what Hiccup had with the Night Fury. With complimenting prosthetics, they were linked at the mind, body, and soul—one was seldom seen without the other. Hiccup had the uncanny ability to understand what Toothless was thinking, and Astrid had seen the two of them carry on an entire conversation in the dragon's growls and Hiccup's hand gestures. There was not another dragon-rider pair that could compete with what they had, and Astrid had accepted early on that to be with Hiccup meant she also had to get closer to Toothless.

It had been an easy task, considering how much Toothless had also come to care for her and Stormfly over the years. It was if the dragon also knew that Hiccup's happiness hinged upon a smooth relationship between himself and Astrid. The Night Fury opened up to her, and so Astrid had taken every opportunity to repay the dragon's kindness—though Hiccup would sometimes protest.

They shared a very different idea about what it meant to love Toothless. For Hiccup, his affections were communicated in the depth of their friendship. For Astrid, it meant showering the Night Fury with attention and favors—often in the form of extra fish. She would try to slip the dragon the occasional cod when Hiccup was not looking, but somehow, he always knew.

"I'm just trying to show Toothless how much I care," Astrid had once explained, after her lover had caught her red-handed.

"You're buying his affection," Hiccup retorted in exasperation.

"It's not like that, is it, Toothless?" Astrid cooed.

The dragon purred appreciatively, rewarding her with a gentle nuzzle, which only seemed to further irritate Hiccup, much to Astrid's amusement.

There had been another incident where the two of them had been preparing their dragons for an evening flight together. The minute Hiccup turned his back, Astrid stroked Toothless beneath his chin, taking great care to scratch him in the one spot that collapsed him in a contented heap on the ground. Astrid could still recall the moment fondly as she fought to stifle a laugh in spite of Hiccup's aggravated groan.

"_Really?"_ he asked, in annoyance—but Toothless did not seem to share in his complaint.

The battle raged ever on between them—Astrid's incessant spoiling of the Night Fury and Hiccup's attempts to curb it. It was just another game they played, and Toothless was more than happy to reap all the benefits of it. While Hiccup had his grievances, he had once confessed to Astrid that he was at least grateful his dragon was so accepting of her, and she could not agree more. She had won over Toothless, so she had unfettered access to her lover. It took Hiccup away from the Night Fury frequently, and so Astrid knew better than to let her affection for Toothless lapse. It was by the dragon's good graces alone that she could even get near Hiccup—a fact she did not take for granted.

Her eyes scanned the Great Hall as she sat alone, finishing the last

few bites of her supper. She had expected to see a familiar black dragon, curled up near a fire pit, but Toothless was notably absent, which suggested Hiccup was, as well. It was not unusual for the two of them to miss a meal, especially given how easily distracted Hiccup was as of late—"so many personal projects called him away to the smithy. It was still a wonder to her how anyone could forget to eat, but Hiccup often managed to do it.

With a sigh, she stood up from the table, carrying her bowl to the nearest cauldron for a refill of a thick rabbit stew. If her lover would not come to meals, then the meals would just have to go to him. She murmured a quick thanks to the woman who ladled the hearty concoction into her bowl before visiting another table to grab a tankard of _bjÃ¶rr*._ She had barely taken two steps towards the doors before nearly colliding with Stoick the Vast. With a small gasp, she managed to stop the contents of her bowl from spilling all over herself, or the tower of a man in front of her.

"Steady there, Astrid," Stoick said jovially.

"Sorry, Chief," she replied breathlessly—"though their paths crossed frequently, she did not think she could ever drop the formality. "I wasn't paying attention."

"Where are ye hurryin' off te with yer arms so burdened?" Stoick asked.

It was a genuine curiosity—"not the interrogations he used to reserve just for their band of friends.

"I was looking for Hiccup," she answered.

"Ah, that makes two of us," the Chief replied, stroking his beard. "I usually assume the two of ye are together."

"He's hard to keep track of, sometimes," Astrid joked.

"Aye, don't I know it," Stoick chuckled. "Always has been. Well, if ye find him, tell him I'm lookin' fer him."

Astrid nodded and stepped aside as he passed. Their interactions were becoming less awkward as time progressed, but she suspected that had more to do with the fact she had become increasingly accomplished at sneaking out of the Haddock household in the mornings, undetected by Stoick.

She bolted out of the Great Hall before she encountered further interruptions and made a beeline for Gobber's smithy. The sun had just disappeared beneath the horizon and the sky was painted a dusky purple hue. There was a chill in the air and Astrid shuddered in the breeze, quickening her pace towards the warmth of the forge. The days were getting shorter and the trees had begun to change—"bursting into brilliant shades of orange and red as they donned the colors of early winter.** She missed the pleasant weather of the summer months, but the latter half of the year brought its own joys and comforts. She could make out the fiery glow of burning coals as she approached the smithy, and the heat they emanated would be welcome against the advance of Berk's bitter winters.

She stepped inside the shop, glancing around carefully to ensure she

was not in the way of any important work-in-progress. Grump, the sluggish Hotburple, was resting beside the forge as Gobber pounded away on glowing iron ore.

"And _then_ I said, 'Ye must be mad if ye think that pile of rubbish is worth two sheep!' Ye should've seen the look on her face"as if no one ever told her that her husband's carpentry was complete yak shit!" Gobber chortled, shaking his head.

"So _that's_ why the Bergfalks hate you. Well, suddenly it all makes so much sense," Hiccup replied, closely examining a complicated metal apparatus on the workbench in front of him.

Astrid cleared her throat loudly, and Gobber nearly dropped his tongs in surprise, as if he expected to see Mrs. Bergfalk standing there, judging him. He was instantly relieved to see Astrid instead, and Hiccup glanced up from his project with a broad smile.

"What brings you to the smithy at this hour, milady?" he asked, setting down his own tools and she strolled over to him.

"Ye'll find nothin' but saucy tales and crass humor here, I'm afraid," Gobber quipped.

Astrid rolled her eyes and extended her food and drink to Hiccup. They were Vikings"crude and irreverent speech was the norm.

"You're so thin, _someone_ needs to make sure you eat," she teased Hiccup.

He instantly recoiled from the tankard in her hand, eyeing it suspiciously.

"Is that yaknog?"

"_No_," she replied defensively. "It's not even the season for it."

He took the meal from her without further complaint and Astrid ran her hand over the metal contraption on his workbench.

"What are you working on?" she asked curiously.

His inventions always astounded her. The things he could dream up blew her mind, and every time an idea of his was realized"impeccably crafted by his own skilled hands"she never failed to be in awe of his brilliance.

"I'm modifying Toothless' tail, again," he replied between spoonfuls of rabbit _skause_. "He'll be able to solo glide. I've been meaning to get around to it for while now."

It was a rather succinct answer, considering he could easily go off on a tangent about any of his projects when he got really excited. He often lost her fairly quickly among all the technical details and aspects of impressive engineering. He would apologize for rambling when he recognized her glazed-over expression, but it honestly did not bother her too much. It was endearing to see him get so passionate.

She studied the Night Fury's metal prosthetic closely, feeling a burning curiosity mounting in her heart. She had ridden Toothless before, many times. She preferred her Nadder, of course, but there was a nagging need to know how it felt to actually fly Toothlessâ€”to be the one connected with the powerful black dragon, as opposed to merely a passenger. After all, there was nothing that solidified the bond between a human and dragon quite like a first flight. It was the moment where the two souls would truly become in-tune to one anotherâ€”where dragon and rider were of one mind. Astrid loved the rush she got whenever she was on Stormfly's back. It was a sensation unlike any other. It was a sacred moment of deep connection between her and her Nadderâ€”one that no one else knew, except Hiccup.

Looking back, he had been the first one to actually fly the Deadly Nadder, and Astrid clung to him as they raced into battle with the Red Death. Hiccup had been in control of Stormfly then, and even after she had come to accept Astrid as her true rider, the dragon had never lost its fondness for Hiccup. Not that Astrid was in any way jealous of that initial bond between her lover and her dragonâ€”it just made them being together that much easier. What nagged at her still was that she could not speak of a similar moment between herself and Toothless. It was the final aspect of her relationship with the Night Fury that was still missing.

There came a soft warble from the corner of the shop, adjacent to Grump. Astrid whipped around and grinned fondly as the Night Fury perked up at the sight of her.

"Toothless!" she exclaimed, hurrying over to the dragon.

He flashed her a gummy smile before she cradled his wide jaw in her hands. He pushed his snout forward against her cheek, nuzzling her affectionately with a gentle rumbling in his throat.

"You spoil him," Hiccup muttered disapprovingly into his tankard of _bjÃ¶rr._

"Like that's a bad thing!" Astrid retorted in a high-pitched tone she often reserved just for babies and dragon hatchlings.

She sat on her knees beside the Night Fury, and Toothless gave a dramatic sigh before laying his head in her lap, rolling on to his back and stretching out like a house cat.

"Poor Toothless!" Astrid cooed playfully, rubbing his neck. "Nobody loves you, do they?"

She glanced at Hiccup with a smirk and he just rolled his eyes before returning to the project on his bench, setting his food and drink aside.

"Heh, heh! I'd say she has a better grasp on that dragon than ye do!" Gobber told Hiccup, amused.

With a frown, Hiccup turned back to his dragon.

"Toothless," he said firmly.

The Night Fury perked up, staring back at his rider with ear nubs twitching. With one critical gaze and a quirk of an eyebrow, Hiccup reprimanded the dragon in silent terms Toothless could understand. The Night Fury rolled back to his stomach and curled up docilely, closing his large eyes and feigning sleep, far from ashamed of himself.

Astrid laughed as she rose to her feet, brushing the dirt from her leggings.

"Hardly the most lethal of dragon species," she said.

"Only around you," Hiccup replied. "I wonder why that is..." he added sarcastically.

Astrid shrugged with mock-innocence, sliding between her lover and his work in an unabashed exercise of her powers of persuasion.

"Hey, hey, _hey!" _Gobber warned. "Not in here! This is a place of business! There's that side room if the two of ye just can't help yerselâ€!"

"We know," Hiccup and Astrid said in unison, and Gobber looked even more affronted.

"_What do ye mean_â€"?"

Astrid ignored the older man, reaching up to gently tug on one of Hiccup's braids.

"My birthday's next week, you know," she said matter-of-factly, and he just laughed.

"Really? How _could_ I have forgotten with you reminding me at every opportunity?" he teased.

Astrid wrinkled her nose at him and swatted his arm playfully.

"I take it you've finally figured out what you want from me?" he asked.

"I have."

Hiccup stared back at her patiently, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I want you to teach me how to fly Toothless," she said, gazing back at him determinedly.

His reaction was just about what she had anticipated. His expression went from surprised, to indignant, to skeptical, and she knew he was trying to think up about a dozen excuses not to agree to her humble request.

"Why would you want to fly Toothless?" he asked suspiciouslyâ€"he was quite possessive of his dragon.

"Why _not_?" Astrid retorted. "There are days where your dad has you busy with responsibilities to Berk. Don't you think it would be to Toothless' benefit if someone else knew how to fly him when you

can't?"

Hiccup opened his mouth to argue, but his words failed him. "Astrid grinned, knowing her logic was sound.

"His tail comes with a steep learning curve," he said. "Not to mention, I'd have to find the older model that you can actually use..."

"Perfect!" Astrid said brightly, clapping her hands together. "When do we start?"

"Hold on! I haven't actually agreed to it!"

"Hiccup, this is what I really want."

She placed a hand on his chest, beseechingly, and she could see the resignation in his eyes as he caved to her wish. Astrid could not recall that last time Hiccup had outright told her "no" not that he lacked the capacity to do so, as much as he like to joke that he did. He had always been so accommodating and Astrid rarely pestered him whenever he did show any reluctance. His generosity was a gift she did not want to abuse, but there was the occasional instance where they were both at odds over something, and Astrid was not above using her feminine charm to sway him if he was already teetering between two decisions.

"Alright," he finally relented, with a heavy sigh. "If this is what you really want, meet me outside my house tomorrow morning, after breakfast. I will teach you how to fly Toothless."

Astrid beamed at him, and he smiled back at her in spite of his own misgivings.

"Thank you," she said, planting a quick kiss on his cheek.

"You're welcome," he replied softly.

Astrid pushed off from the workbench and made her way towards the exit.

"Your dad is looking for you, by the way," she added, lingering near Toothless.

"Why do you think I've been hiding in here?" Hiccup said, quirked an eyebrow.

Astrid smirked and shook her head, reaching out to pet the Night Fury.

"See you tomorrow, Toothless," she murmured.

As she stepped out into the twilight, she heard Gobber round on Hiccup immediately.

"Have the two of ye..._in that room_?"

Without missing a beat, Hiccup answered in a completely innocent tone, "I don't know what you're talking about."

* * *

><p>Astrid watched with a nervous excitement as Hiccup finished strapping Toothless' old prosthetic into place. It was the one with a foot pedalâ€”the very first, complete model he had ever built. He was not one to get rid of his old creations. He usually stored them away or repurposed various parts for newer projects, and Astrid was thankful for his sentimental attachment to his earlier work.<p>

"There," he said, once he was satisfied the tail fin was secure, "all set."

Toothless fidgeted uncomfortably and Hiccup patted him sympathetically.

"I know, bud. It's been a while, and it's heavier than your new tail, but it's only temporary."

Astrid stepped forward and ran her hand along the dragon's snout.

"Thank you for doing this," she told the dragon.

Toothless just snorted impatiently, communicating he was less than pleased with the arrangementâ€”he did not enjoy anyone else flying him, and with good reason. No one understood the dragon like Hiccup did, therefore the Night Fury would not be able to fly free and unencumbered with a rider who was truly in-tune with him. Astrid made a mental note to slip the dragon a suitable amount of extra fish, to make amends for thrusting her clumsy inexperience upon him.

She turned to Hiccup, reaching up to play with one of his braids, twisting it between her fingers.

"Thank you for agreeing to this," she said softly. "I know you're not too crazy about the idea."

"It can be dangerous to fly Toothless if you don't know what you're doingâ€”"

"You mean like that very first time you flew him?" Astrid interrupted, pointedly.

"â€”but if I'm with you, it'll be much safer," he continued, ignoring her comment. "Besides, I was thinking bout what you said, and it makes sense. Toothless needs someone else that knows how to fly him whenever I can't."

"Wow, I was kind of grasping for any excuse toâ€”"

"There's no one else I trust to take care of him," Hiccup said, patting the Night Fury on his head.

Toothless warbled softly and nudged his rider affectionately. Hiccup flashed the dragon a warm smile and ran his hand along the Night Fury's jaw. The significance of his statement was not lost on Astrid. There was no other dragon-rider pair that was bonded deeper. Hiccup and Toothless were like two halves of a wholeâ€”incomplete without the other. For him to give her any level of control over his dragon

was breaching a whole new level of trust between them. It was the last part of his heart he had not yet surrendered to her. It was a closely guarded, sacred thingâ€”that undefinable connection he shared with Toothless. By granting her request to let her in, and experience even a fragment of what he had with his Night Fury, Hiccup was truly giving her everything he had. There would be no part of his life that remained closed off to herâ€”and perhaps that was the real reason he was so hesitant.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked, stepping aside to let her climb into his saddle.

Astrid felt her heart pound with anticipation as she settled herself comfortably on the Night Fury's back. She positioned her foot on the pedal, pressing it down experimentally. She glanced back at the tail fin as it readjusted with each change in gear, feeling a whole new sensation of control she did not possess with Stormfly.

"Amazing," she said. "Hiccup, you really are incredible."

He laughed softly, but he looked genuinely flattered by the compliment.

"Aren't you getting on?" she asked, curiously.

"When it's actually time for you to fly him," he answered.

Astrid frowned and replied, "So...what I am I doing now?"

"Memorizing each position of his tail to _my_ satisfaction."

Astrid rolled her eyes and groaned.

"We'll be here all day! I'm a much more of an on-the-job kind of learner," she protested.

"If you think I'm going to let you fly hundreds of feet in the air without a basic understanding of how his tail works, you're crazy!"

Astrid sighed heavily and reluctantly agreed to the lengthy tutorialâ€”there would be no flying Toothless any other way. So she sat there, patiently listening to Hiccup's explanation of each position of the prosthetic tail and how it impacted Toothless' maneuverability and speed. There were only six different gear changes that could be made on the outdated, initial design, and with each one, Hiccup knelt down and guided the pedal into the correct position. Eventually, he started calling out random numbers, one through six, and Astrid was supposed to respond accordingly. At first, she was annoyed by the lesson, but she quickly realized how necessary it wasâ€”it took quite a bit of focus to associate the position of the pedal with the desired number and effect, then react quickly enough that it would not impede the dragon's flight when they were actually airborne. It was not as intuitive as she had originally expectedâ€”Hiccup had always made it look so easy. Just when she thought she might be getting the hang of it, he further complicated it by spontaneously throwing out directions, alternating with numbersâ€”dive, one, climb, four, glide, three, and so onâ€”that she was meant to correctly translate into tail fin adjustments. With each

error she made, she gained a greater appreciation for just how natural it was for Hiccup. Truly, he was a genius—and very patient. They were probably a couple hours into it, and while the dragon seemed to be growing bored and impatient, Hiccup offered nothing but encouragement.

"I will get this," she told him firmly, and Toothless interjected with a skeptical snort. "I will!" she insisted to the Night Fury.

"I know," Hiccup replied. "There's no hurry."

Toothless growled in disagreement and Astrid scoffed.

"Oh, stop," she told the dragon. "It's not that bad."

"It won't be much longer. You've pretty much got the hang of it now," Hiccup said, placing his hand on her knee reassuringly.

"Just not to your satisfaction, right?" she retorted flatly.

He gave her a small, apologetic smile and Astrid sighed in frustration.

"How did you do it? How did you figure all of this out?" she asked.

"Toothless and I were falling to our deaths—I didn't have much of a choice. It was get it right or die trying," he replied.

"Great. That helps me out so much," she said sarcastically.

Hiccup took pity on her and climbed up behind her, placing his hands on her waist.

"What are you doing?" she asked suspiciously.

"You said you're more of an 'on-the-job' learner, right? Well, I think you've come far enough that we'll survive one flight. Maybe, being up there and actually feeling the changes you make will help it all come together?" he replied with a shrug.

Suddenly, Astrid was nervous. In her impatience she wanted nothing more than to get off the ground and apply what she had learned, but she felt ill-prepared, and Toothless was not a very forgiving dragon to fly.

"You're going to regret those words, when I get us all killed," she teased, trying to mask her apprehension.

Hiccup laughed and gave her waist an affectionate squeeze. He confidently replied, "No, you won't."

She took a deep breath and patted the dragon on his thick neck.

"Okay, Toothless. Let's do this," she said.

The Night Fury narrowed his eyes and rolled his shoulders eagerly. He spread out his wings and waited for Astrid to comply. With only a slight hesitation, she clicked the prosthetic into position. There

was nothing left to think about at that pointâ€”how could she? She had only just registered the adjustment of the tail fin before Toothless was racing through the air in a steep ascent. She had ridden the dragon enough times to be unsurprised by his speed, but it was a much different feeling to enjoy the flight, clinging tightly to her lover, than to be the one in control, responsible for keeping the Night Fury flying smoothly. Sitting in front of Hiccup, she felt more connected to Toothless' power than she ever had, feeling every twitch and pull of his muscles beneath her legs. It took her breath away as the wind rushed through her hair and Berk shrank into a distant swatch of color beneath them. They had only just burst through the thin wisps of clouds before Toothless began to lean forward.

Astrid's brain began to panic as it struggled to recall the various tail positions that she previously committed to memory. In the heat of the moment, it was as if all she had learned in the preceeding two hours had flown from her head. She adjusted the tail fin into what she hoped was the correct position for a straight glide, only to have Toothless veer sharply to the right, losing altitude, instead. The dragon roared in protest, beating his wings furiously as he fought against the unintended gear change.

"Four," Hiccup said calmly in her ear, and Astrid quickly made the correction.

Her heart could finally beat again as Toothless eased into an easy, controlled glide, sailing over the low lying clouds that hovered over their island. The Night Fury emitted a series of short, low growls that Astrid suspected would be rife with curse words, if dragons could talk.

"There's no need for that, bud," Hiccup scolded. "I wasn't much better, once."

"Sorry!" she apologized, and Toothless snorted, shaking his head irritably. "Sorry!" she repeated again, for Hiccup's benefit.

"You're doing fine," he replied. "We're still alive, aren't we?"

Astrid rolled her eyes and gripped the dragon's leather harness tightly, refocusing on the task at hand. She would have to take subtle cues from Toothless, sensing the slight changes in the dragon's flight path. She concentrated again on the feeling of his shifting bulk, repositioning the tail fin as he began to list to one side. Her assumption proved correct, and the dragon continued to glide smoothly into a wide arc. Excitement rippled through her, and she was emboldened by even a small success. It was an amazing feeling to physically and mentally synchronize with the Night Fury on such a fundamental level.

Toothless began to tip forward, so Astrid changed gears again, causing only a slight, jerky delay before the Night Fury dove towards the shimmering waves below.

"Go, Toothless!" she cried, feeling her eyes water from the chilling wind that battered her face as they raced towards the rolling sea.

The dragon roared happily, forgiving past mistakes with each correct readjustment of his prosthetic. He started to pull out of his dive as the water drew ever closer, and Astrid clicked his tail back into position four in time for Toothless to skim the surface of the waves with his claws. He began to twist to one side again, and Astrid took the chance to select a new position of his fin, startled when it caused the dragon to perform a complete midair roll. Toothless seemed thrilled by the stunt.

"You might want to take it easy, bud," Hiccup warned, but Astrid had no intention of slowing down.

"Are you kidding me? That was amazing!" she exclaimed. "Toothless, do it again!"

The dragon began to twist as he had before, and Astrid quickly repositioned his tail fin. They were inverted once more, and she cheered gleefully as she reached out to touch the sea with her fingertips before Toothless was flying upright again.

Whenever she had been a passenger, Hiccup and Toothless kept their usual aerial acrobatics to a minimum. From that very first flight together, Astrid had grown to dislike the Night Fury's tricks. She could not anticipate them, and so she was often left clinging desperately to Hiccup to avoid being thrown from the dragon—but it was different being in control. She could feel Toothless' movements, and she could correctly interpret his cues. She knew what was coming and granted his wishes with a slight flexion of her foot against the pedal. Together, she and Toothless could accomplish wild stunts. She was not just a passive rider anymore—she was a necessary part of the dragon's flight.

She did not have that same sensation with Stormfly. The Nadder flew independently of her, carrying on according to her own will until Astrid issued a command. Her dragon, as much as everyone else's, had come to understand how she thought, and their bond was strengthened the longer they were together. Their connection allowed Stormfly to accurately guess what Astrid wanted, performing the moves her rider desired before she had a chance to demand them. It lent itself to seamless flying, and Astrid seldom had to give her dragon verbal orders anymore. In that respect, her bond with Stormfly was strong—but never could it go any deeper. There would never be the same level of mutual dependence and need there—not like Hiccup and Toothless. Stormfly did not need a rider to be complete, but Toothless did. The dragon no longer seemed upset by the fact, however. He seemed to actually prefer it, from what Astrid had seen. There was something to be said about a dragon that chose to be entirely dependent on his rider for flight. It spoke volumes about the trust that existed between Hiccup and Toothless. Hiccup had once given Toothless the ability to fly on his own, but the dragon turned around and relinquished that gift of natural, independent flight. It had to be liberating for the Night Fury to belong to someone who truly knew him—understood him. There must have been something as emotionally fulfilling for Toothless, in the bond they shared, that kept him willingly dependent on Hiccup. Whatever the two of them had, Toothless wanted to protect it just as badly as Hiccup did. The dragon wanted to keep his missing piece. Finally, Astrid could be that for the Night Fury—not nearly to the same degree, of course—but for the first time, she fully understood him.

She clicked her heel into position three, and the dragon climbed higher, speeding past the gulls that were gliding languidly in the sea breeze. Toothless trusted her, and she trusted him. Their wills were aligned as they had never been before. What the Night Fury wanted, she did also. The excitement she sought, the dragon was happy to provide.

"Oh, my gods!" she cried. "This is amazing!"

She heard Hiccup laugh at her childlike wonderâ€"not because he found it foolish, but because he was undoubtedly amused. Astrid could only imagine he had been there before, and saw a lot of his younger self in her elation. He said very little as the flight continued, and Astrid was thankful for it. He was allowing her to lose herself in the joy of it all, for it was pure bliss to let go of everything else. She had no worries or concernsâ€"nothing mattered but connecting with the powerful dragon beneath her.

Indeed, it was much easier to operate the tail when she could feel the effects of her adjustments. Any further mistakes were minorâ€"unsteady, jarring movements when she was late in interpreting a cue from Toothless. She did not know how long they were flying among the rolling waves and the sea stacksâ€"an hour, maybeâ€" but she supposed it really did not matter. Just like flying Stormfly, up among the clouds, time had no meaning. Other responsibilities were of no consequence. Being connected with Toothless, it was as close to actually being a dragon as humanly possible.

Astrid could have kept flying for ages, but Hiccup leaned forward and patted Toothless on his side, saying, "Let's take it home, bud."

The dragon warbled in agreement and it was a far less eventful affair to fly him back to Berk. He glided towards the island at a steady speed, and Astrid took a moment to glance down and admire the beautiful animal beneath her. Toothless was one of a kind, and his prosthetic only made him more outstanding, opposed to holding him back. Over the years, she had grown to love him, but learning to fly him, and applying all that she had learned, gave her an even greater appreciation for how complex and magnificent he was.

The dragon landed gracefully beside the Haddock household and Astrid slid from the dragon, combing back her loose strands of hair with her fingers. Hiccup dismounted after her, standing beside Toothless to praise him for his cooperation.

"Wow! I had no idea!" Astrid exclaimed, turning to Hiccup with wide-eyed excitement. "I mean, I've flown with you enough times, but to actually be the one in controlâ€"wow! The speed and the power! It's like I've never actually flown a dragon beforeâ€"Don't tell Stormfly, by the way!"

"Your secret's safe with me," Hiccup replied teasingly.

Astrid strode over to Toothless and cradled his head in her hands.

"That was...unbelievable! You and I will have to do a lot more of that," she cooed to the dragon.

Toothless stared at her skeptically, with drooping ear nubs. She faced Hiccup again, feeling breathless.

"I...you...thank you, for that," she said, smiling at him fondly.

"You're welcome," he replied, running his hand along the Night Fury's back, and Toothless arched into his touch. "Now you know what it's like. I suppose you're the only other person that does..."

As he spoke, he sounded almost disappointedâ€”like he had lost something important.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly, grasping his hand.

"It's nothing," he answered dismissively. "I justâ€”Happy birthday, Astrid! Well, I guess it's actually next week, isn't it? Stillâ€”_mmpf!_"

He was rambling, as he did when he was nervous or trying to talk his way out of a lie. Astrid shook her head and cut him off with a kiss, reaching up to grip him tightly by his riding leather. He tensed at first, as she forced her lips on his, but she felt him relax against her as the kiss continued. He placed a hand on the small of her back as they broke apart slowly, still standing incredibly close. Their eyes met and Astrid could see the conflict in his eyes. It went back to everything she had suspected beforeâ€”for the first time, he was truly exposed. She had come to know what it was like to fly Toothlessâ€”to connect with him on a deeper level. Subsequently, it meant she had reached Hiccup on a deeper level, as well. In her effort to get closer to Toothless, and close that last mysterious gap between them, she had unknowingly become closer to Hiccupâ€”closer than anyone else could ever get. There was nothing left that was exclusively his. She had touched every part of his life, and that very last fragment of privacy and trust was the most precious gift he could have ever given her.

"I'm...I'm glad you can fly Toothless," he said quietly, tracing the end of her long braid with his fingertips.

"I know it must've been hard for you...to let that go," she replied.

"Let what go?"

"That last piece of you."

He pressed his forehead to hers, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. They kissed again, deeper, and Astrid surrendered herself to it. Their intimacy was the only thing in the world more satisfying than riding dragons.

"It wasn't as difficult as you'd think," Hiccup said as their lips parted once more. "I've told you before, Astrid...you can have all ofâ€”_Toothless!_"

Not wanting to be left out of all the affection, the dragon had crept up on the distracted lovers and interjected his own feelings by catching them both with a long, wet, sweep of his tongue. They broke apart, desperately wiping the sticky saliva from their skin in

disgust, while the dragon just "laughed".

"What was that?" Astrid asked, indignantly, shaking off thick ropes of Night Fury slobber.

"It's this new thing he does," Hiccup said, irritably. "Normally, he only does it to me, but I guess, well...you're his now, too. Congratulations," he added sarcastically.

Astrid considered the Night Fury as she tried to wipe her face clean. Toothless was staring back at her with rounded pupils and perked up ear nubs. It was endearing, while the sticky saliva was not, but she could not stay angry. She had come to accept that the dragon, and all his oddities, would be a permanent fixture in her life. After all, Hiccup was hers, and so Toothless was her dragon, also. Conversely, if she belonged to Hiccup, then she was Toothless' human, too. Such was the nature of their entire relationship—her, Hiccup, and Toothless. The Night Fury and his rider were inseparable, and as Astrid grew closer to one of them, it meant she inevitably grew closer to the other. Of course, Toothless would never truly be hers, in the same way that Stormfly—no matter how much she cared for Hiccup—would never belong to anyone else but Astrid. However, to be both loved and accepted by the Night Fury as a necessary part of Hiccup's life was comforting. Learning to fly the dragon had forged a whole new bond between them than had drawn her even deeper in to Hiccup's world—the place he fled to to escape the rest of Berk and all the stresses that hung over him. It was a strange and unique triangle the three of them were a part of, but it was only fitting for a young man and his dragon that were, themselves, strange and unique.

She smiled to herself as Hiccup and Toothless wrestled one another—the Night Fury trying to adorn his rider with more affectionate slobber, while Hiccup tried his hardest to push the dragon back and hold his massive jaws shut. Their relationship, though Astrid had gotten to experience a part of it, was still very much their own. They were animal and trainer one moment, best friends the next, but they could also pick on each other with all the mercilessness of siblings. Boys, Astrid thought, in exasperation.

But they were her boys, and the gods only knew how deeply she had come to love them both.

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling the request by one of my dearest readers, Blue Violet Rose. You wanted some Astrid and Toothless bonding, and here it is, my friend! I hope it meets your expectations. Kind of lengthy for one of my typical one shots, but I was thinking about a line Astrid said in HTTYD2. She tells Hiccup "I'll have to fly Toothless, because you'll be too busy..." but we've never seen anyone else learn how to properly fly Toothless. I mean, Stoick hijacked him and crashed him into some things, much to Hiccup's horror—but this prompt gave me the opportunity to explore my own thoughts on how Astrid might've come to learn to fly the Night Fury.

It's like learning to drive a stick-shift! :D

Viking Facts n' Such:

*bjÃ¶rr- "Until the last ten years or so, philologists thought that _beor_ and _bjÃ¶rr_ were derived from the word for barley, and it is only recently that it was realized that the term almost certainly referred to cider (whether from apples or pears) during the Viking Age."

**Vikings had a 12 month calendar, but they only counted 2 season: Summer and winter. Early winter here refers to mid autumn. I saw some orange foliage in HTTYD2, so I am _assuming_ it takes place sometime in the fall.

4. Emotions Are Hard

**Author's Note: **This prompt covers two times periods for the majority of itâ€” During the first HTTYD film, and during my first fic, _Affairs Of the Heart, And Other Things Vikings Don't Talk About_. The opening scene of pre-Snoggletoog festivities occurs shortly before "Temper" in my one-shot collection, _One Year, And A Dozen Words._ Hopefully, that won't be too confusing. I'll be time skipping, is what I'm trying to say. Hiccup and Astrid will be either 15 or 18, depending on which flashback you're reading at the time. They are 18 in the opening, wintery setup. Are we sufficiently confused now? Good.

Disclaimer: I don't own the HTTYD franchise. I just like to borrow the characters for my amateur writing to make Hiccup and Astrid kiss and stuff. That's what you're here for, right?

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Astrid dusted the snow from her hair as she squeezed into the Great Hall, trying to keep the double doors as close together as possible before slamming them shut behind her. The chilling winds were whipping furiously outside, and Berk was relentlessly battered by the icy gales of the Archipelago's long, harsh winters. It was common, for anyone brave enough to venture outdoors, to seek shelter by the roaring fire pits of the Great Hall when the temperature dropped too low and all feeling vanished from the face and fingers. A bowl of stew and a mug of ale or cider was often required to bring warmth back to the body before braving the elements once more.

Vigorously rubbing her hands together, Astrid sought out the usual table she shared with her friends. Even when they were in short supply, it was rare that any other Hooligans occupied their seats. Her little group often joked amongst themselves that the other Berkians were afraid to catch the "twinsanity"â€”a contagious disease that struck its victims with an incurable, yet temporary, state of assbattery.

She spotted Fishlegs, Snotlout, and Tuffnut at their table, each with a drink in hand. Ruffnut and Hiccup were nowhere to be seen, much to Astrid's disappointment.

"What's up, boys?" she asked, plopping down beside Fishlegs.

She exhaled warm breath onto her hands, feeling as though tiny

pinpricks were sticking her fingers as they began to regain feeling.

"Trying to ride the storm out," Snotlout answered. "I'm waiting for the winds to die down a little before I try to make it home."

"You might be here overnight, then," Astrid replied. "Gothi predicts it will get worse before it lightens up."

"I already have a nice patch of floor picked out by the casks of ale, just in case," he said, grinning.

"What are you doing here?" Tuffnut asked her, curiously. "I thought you'd be off somewhere else, wrapped around Hiccup" or him around you. However you guys like to make that happen."

Astrid glanced down at her hands, pretending to find their numbness fascinating as she hid the discomfort on her face. The feeling did not need to return to her cheeks for her to know she was blushing slightly"the curse of a fair complexion. Just because that had been her initial plan, did not mean the other boys needed to be made aware of it.

"Where is Ruffnut?" Astrid wondered, evading the male Thortson's question with her own.

Tuffnut snickered and replied, "She lost a bet"which one of us could hold our breath the longest before passing out"and so she's mucking out Barf and Belch's stall. I bet she's having a rough go of it. Ever try to rake out frozen dragon shit?"

Astrid wrinkled her nose and responded, "Can't say that I have..."

Snotlout and Tuffnut cackled gleefully at Ruffnut's undoubted misery, clinking their mugs of ale together.

"Dude, she's going to be so pissed at you," Snotlout said, patting his friend on the shoulder.

"She already is. She cursed me out so bad before she left the house. It was awesome," Tuffnut replied with a wicked grin.

Astrid shook her head and glanced over at Fishlegs, who was being uncharacteristically silent. He had an empty tankard in one hand, while propping up his drooping head with the other. The occasional loud slam of the Great Hall doors startled him awake, but only for a moment. He would then mumble something unintelligible before nodding off again"a telltale sign that the larger boy was, in fact, quite drunk. For his size, he was surprisingly susceptible to the effects of a small amount of alcohol. Fishlegs never sought to get utterly wasted whenever he drank, but as the weather turned bitter and their dragons were grounded, there was little else for a young, restless dragon rider to do around their frozen little village. With Snoggletog only a few days away, a surplus of food and drink was easier to come by than it would be during the rest of the brutal winter months.

"How long has he been like this?" Astrid asked curiously, kicking Fishlegs in the shin, beneath the table.

The other Viking snorted and just dropped his head to the table with a faint groan.

"Maybe a half hour?" Snotlout answered with a shrug. "Trust me, it's an improvement compared to how he was behaving earlier."

"What do you mean?"

"He was carrying on about 'poor Meatlug is sad because she can't fly in this weather.' Poor widdle Gwonckle is pouting, and it breaks his widdle fishy heart," Snotlout said, mockingly. "Then he started blubbering like a little bitch. It was lame."

Astrid felt a twinge of pity for the larger young man. Fishlegs was always enduring the others' teasing for being particularly sensitive—a trait which was only amplified by the inhibition-lowering effects of a few stiff drinks. He would inevitably end up passing out, but not before he became over emotional, crying over something relatively insignificant or shouting out proclamations of love to each of his friends—particularly Hiccup, who was always so tactful and good-natured about it.

"At least he isn't an angry drunk, like my sister," Tuffnut offered, taking a sip of his own ale.

"Or a pompous, boastful ass," Astrid added, staring at Snotlout pointedly.

He was oblivious to her quip as he chuckled into his mug. Often the punchline to so many jokes, she wondered if he had conditioned himself to be deaf to them.

"What kind of drunk are you, Astrid?" Snotlout asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her suggestively.

"Not the kind that would ever give you the time of day, if that's what you're getting at," she retorted.

"You've never done anything you regretted? Never gotten overly emotional on a little bit of wine or mead?"

Tuffnut barked out a short laugh, slapping his hand against the table.

"Come on, Snotlout! Astrid doesn't cry!" he exclaimed. He then turned to Astrid and asked, very seriously, "I mean, are you even able to cry?"

"Don't be a moron!" she snapped. "Of course, I can cry."

"Really?" Tuffnut inquired, leaning in. "Name one time, in your entire life that you actually can remember."

Astrid was taken aback by his challenge, and she scowled at his smug grin.

"I...there was..."

Snotlout and Tuffnut stared back at her, smirking broader at her

hesitation.

"Oh, what does it even matter?" she asked, irritably.

"I knew it!" Tuffnut retorted triumphantly. "You're inhuman."

"So, what's it like, Astridâ€"to have no feelings, I mean?" Snotlout snickered.

She rolled her eyes and pushed back from the table, deciding that standing in line for a bowl of fish and potato _skause_ was a better use of her time than entertaining two halves of a whole idiot.

"You guys are such dumbasses," she muttered, ignoring their guffaws as she strode away from the table, making a beeline for the nearest cauldron.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, glowering at the floor as she waited for a bowl. It was not that she did not have an honest answer for the two young men, but rather she felt there were details of her life the two of them were not privileged enough to know. In fact, no one was. She had a reputation to uphold, not that it would have been an earth-shattering event to be caught shedding a tear. Like everyone else, Astrid had her weaknessâ€"things that tugged at her heartstrings more than others. Oh, she could cry. She _had_ criedâ€"but she did not see the merits in letting anyone else know about it, much less, witness it. She clung to the traditional Viking standards of strength, and a firm, unwavering countenance was preferable for public grieving than uncontrolled wailing and sobbing. Some expressions of emotion were better left for solitude, where one could be completely unhinged and undignified as they pleased. If she was going to cry, she was going to do so alone, in private, so she could maintain a brave face in the presence of others. That was how Astrid coped, and that was how she liked itâ€"but even still, bouts of crying had been few and far between where she was concerned. Her anguish usually manifested as anger or frustration, but there had been two distinct occasions, in her recent memory, that she allowed herself to succumb to tears. Two distinct occasions she would never confess to another living soulâ€"not even Hiccup. The sad reality was, on both occasions, the love of her life had been the cause of her sorrow.

Hiccup did not have a death wish, but he could be surprisingly reckless and irresponsible with his own life. Astrid had first learned this fact when he had taken on the Red Death, by himself, in an impressive display of courage, and complete and utter lunacy. Thank the gods for Toothless, who had thrown himself into the mass of flames after his unconscious rider. Astrid could not forget the way she had forgotten to breathe, fingernails digging into her skin as she clutched her face in horror. Perhaps she should have realized then that she was in love with him, but even as the tears stung her eyes, gazing at the Night Fury with a mangled prosthetic, she was in denialâ€"that she loved him, and that he could be dead. The relief she felt when Toothless unfurled his wings, revealing an alive and _mostly_ intact Hiccup, was matched only by the boy's own father. She might have cried then, but she held it togetherâ€"nearly the entire village had been there.

On the return trip to Berk, as the adults packed themselves tightly into the longships that had survived the siege on Dragon Island,

Astrid flew beside one particular vessel on the back of the Deadly Nadder. She glided low, parallel to the ship, anxiously casting glances to where Hiccup lie unconscious on deck, his Night Fury curled protectively around him. Gobber, and a number of other Vikings were standing by Stoick, talking quick and urgently, advising their Chief on the grim decision that had to be made.

"He's bleedin' out, Stoick!" one woman insisted. "He won't make it back te Berk unless we _do_ somethin' about it."

"The leg's barely hangin' on as it isâ€"all burnt and tore up like that," Gobber chimed in. "Best te take it now, before he wakes up."

"How will he walk again?" Stoick asked, frowning. "This is my only son ye're talkin' about. I won't trust just anyone te build him a new leg."

"I'll do it," Gobber volunteered. "I think I'm the best Viking fer the job, considering my expertise in the area."

He held up his own peg leg, pointedly.

"Right," Stoick agreed, staring wistfully at what remained of Hiccup's left leg. "Do what ye have te. I'm sure...I'm sure he'll understand."

There was a sudden scramble on deck amidst shouts of, "Tie that leather cord really tight! Tie it right above theâ€"no, no! That's too high. It needs te be a wee bit closer te hisâ€"there! That's the spot!" and, "We need an axe! Quickly! The sharpest one ye can find!" Someone also ordered, "Bring a torch! We need te heat up the blade!"

Toothless fidgeted nervously as a crowd of fully grown Vikings approached his human with a heavy axe in hand. He bared his teeth and snarled at them, crouching defensively over Hiccup.

"It's alright," Stoick said, laying his hand cautiously on the dragon's snout. "This will help him. Ye saved him once already, so let us do our part."

Toothless seemed mollified by the Chief's words, and he slowly backed away from his injured human, watching skeptically as several people knelt around Hiccup.

"Do it right, now," Gobber commanded the man holding the axe. "Just one, clean cut. Get it on the first try."

"Would ye shut it? I know how te take a limb off!" the man retorted peevishly.

As he lifted the axe above his head, Astrid could see Hiccup's leg clearly through a gap between two Vikings. Feeling the bile rise in her throat, she turned away quickly as she heard the dull _thud_ of the axe against the deck of the longship. There was no cry of pain and agony to drown out the sound that would echo in her memory. From above her, she heard the twins' united comment of, "_Awesome_!"

She could have cried then, while everyone else was distractedâ€"Odin

only knew how badly she wanted toâ€”but no tears came. Her eyes remained dry as they reached Berk. The initial chaos of racing Hiccup back to his house, and the awkward adjustment of the village to the freely roaming dragons took precedence over everything else. Astrid took the necessary time to reassure her parents that she was whole and well before retreating to her bedroom to escape the surrounding madness. Rushing to her window, she threw open the shutters, watching the Haddock household until the number of visitors dwindled down to only Gobber, lumbering up the hill with a bundle of wood and metal under his bulky arm. It was nearly nightfall by that point, but Astrid did not think the Chief would mind. Surely, he would be glad there were people that cared about his son, at all.

Skipping dinner and her parents' inquiries, she hurried through the village toward the largest house, settled atop a hill overlooking the rest of Berk. She hesitated for a moment as she reached the front door, fist poised, but then she knocked softly praying her presence would not be seen as an intrusion in Hiccup's fragile state.

"Come in," she heard Stoick's booming voice call from inside.

Feeling a bit awkward, Astrid pushed open the front door, peering into the dark living room, lit only by the faint flickering fire steadily burning in the hearth. Tentatively, she crossed the threshold, feeling as though she was treading on some forbidden groundâ€”never did she think she would have cause to be in the Chief's impressive house. She closed the door behind her, taking a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. She noticed all other furniture had been pushed aside to make room for a single bed, flanked on either side by Stoick and Gobber. Toothless lingered nearby as well, and all three of them glanced up at her as she approached.

"I-I hope I not...I can come back later ifâ€”"

"Nonsense!" Gobber interrupted, waving his one good hand dismissively. "Yer welcome te stay, considerin' all ye kids did fer Berk."

Stoick cast Gobber a critical glare, quirking his eyebrow at the man's disregard for his authority in his own home.

"I didn't..." Astrid replied modestly. "It was all Hiccup who..."

She trailed off when she finally got a clear look at him, scraped and bruised as he lie there, looking even smaller than usual in his injured state. The covers were pulled back at the foot of the bed, and Astrid could see the new, crude prosthetic Gobber had just fitted him with. It had a rather unusual, functional design, but it looked painfulâ€”a solid block of wood tied to the remains of his leg.

Astrid gripped tightly to the foot of the bed, biting her bottom lip as it trembled. Involuntarily, her eyes begun to water, and she turned away from the two grown men, showing her weakness to Toothless, instead.

"So, I need te talk te ye about that...that thing," Gobber said

quickly, grabbing the Chief's attention.

Astrid was painfully aware that both men's eyes were on her.

"What thing?" Stoick replied dubiously.

"Ye knowâ€”_that thing_!" Gobber insisted.

Astrid cast him a quick sidelong glance and noticed he was nodding pointedly in her direction. Stoick seemed to catch on.

"Ah, right. Yes. That thing. It's important," he played along, striding towards the door.

Gobber limped after him, shutting the door behind them, leaving Astrid alone with the Night Fury, Hiccup, and her raging emotions. She took a steadying breath, walking slowly towards the head of the bed. There was a stool there, no doubt from where Stoick had been sitting and keeping watch over his vulnerable son, and she pulled it closer, taking a seat.

At first, she just stared at the unconscious boy in front of her, listening to his slow, steady breathing. She did not know what to sayâ€”or if she really needed to say anything at all. Would he even be able to hear her, or remember her words when he woke up? She doubted it, but still, she felt like she needed to speak to himâ€”to let him know she was there.

She reached out for him, to brush his bangs out of his face, but her fingers lingered inches from him. Breathing suddenly became difficult, and her vision was blurred by unshed tears.

"Hiccup...I..." she whispered.

Then, suddenly, she was overcome.

She clapped a hand over her mouth and choked out a sob, thick tears streaming down her face, falling into her lap at a constant rate. The more she tried to control itâ€”to hold back the torrent of emotionâ€”the harder she bawled. She could not pinpoint why she was crying as her chest heaved and tears flowedâ€”perhaps it was everything? All at once.

Only days before, she could not stand the sight of Hiccup. She wanted him to disappear. She had gone from indifference to loathing as he stole her glory in the ring. Then, she had learned the truthâ€”the boy had tamed a _Night Fury!_ She hated him even more thanâ€”for the lying, for convincing everyone that he was better than her, and for accomplishing something impossible and unheard of. There was _nothing_ about him to likeâ€”or so she had thoughtâ€”until one flight had change all that. It changed herâ€”canged everything she ever believed about dragons and the first Viking crazy enough to ride one.

As she looked down at Hiccup in the present, battered and broken in his bed, she felt nothing but respect for him. Respect and awe. He had endured so muchâ€”cruel words, heartless jokes, and physical battery from his cousin. She had ignored him for so many yearsâ€”treated him as if he was invisible on most occasions. She had

been no better than the other teens that ridiculed him. She had treated him so unfairly. He had been so despised and so outcast, and still he had risked so muchâ€”for dragons, and for the people who had been nothing but horrible to him for nearly fifteen long years. She did not know anyone else who would do thatâ€”who would be so selfless and so foolishly brave.

She sobbed harder, feeling guilty. She felt like a wicked person for doing her part to make Hiccup's life so miserable. She would take it all back if she could. She would start overâ€”get to know him without all the opinions of the other villagers to sway her from befriending him. He had needed someone to lean on, and no one had ever been there. It had taken a dragon to see the worth in a boy the rest of the world had all but discarded. Each sob was cleansing, as if she was purging her soul and making amends for her selfishness. Hiccup was so resilient, never turning to bitterness or depression over his circumstances, that Astrid felt she was crying for him. In her tears were years of torment and isolation that Hiccup had so incredibly decided to let go and put behind him. There needed to be some kind of paymentâ€”reparations for his loneliness. The more she cried, the more she felt the gods were collecting on that debt.

She had been blindâ€”as self-absorbed as Snotlout, and as totally oblivious as either one of the twins. She wished she could switch places with him and endure his pain, and suffer his injuriesâ€”the gods only knew how he was the very last person that deserved any of them. Yet, he had received those injuries anyway, because nobody else would. There was nobody else with his heart and his spirit to make the sacrifices that needed to be made. There was nobody else like him anywhere, and Berk had almost lost him before anyone had the chance to truly appreciate his worth.

"It's not f-fair," she whispered between heaves. "You don't get t-to d-do this to meâ€”make me care about you, and then nearly get yourself k-k-killed!"

Tears fell a couple of minutes more, as she wrestled her sobs under control. Only when she had regained enough composure did she finally stand up, sniffing and tucking her loose hair behind her ear.

"You better pull through this, Haddock," she warned. "Don't you die for them. Don't you die for me. There's no one here on Berk that's as insane as you areâ€”and right now...we need your particular kind of crazy."

She bent over and kissed his forehead gently, then leapt back in alarm when the tender gesture caused Hiccup to stir. He groaned faintly and turned his head to the side, but did not wake. Toothless perked up excitedly at the movement, but his ear nubs drooped in disappointment when no further progress was made. The dragon made a pitiful noise, akin to a whimper, as he folded his scaly arms and rested his head upon them, looking defeated.

Feeling more optimistic for Hiccup to make a full recovery than she had been, Astrid reached down and grasped his hand tightly, giving it a squeeze. Before she left his side that night, she silently vowed to never take him for granted again.

But that did not last.

Only a short year later did Astrid make the conscious decision to keep Hiccup at a distance, forgetting the vow she had made to herself. Things were supposed to have been easier that wayâ€”for the both of them. She treated him as indifferently as she could manageâ€”albeit, under much friendlier terms than the first time. She ignored the sadness in his eyes and the hurt in his voice as she pushed him away. It was easier to overlook it entirely, denying she could be the cause of such emotions in him. She closed herself off to his feelings, convincing herself their friendship had eventually decayed into a cold, yet cordial, coexistence. It was less painful to misinterpret his body language into disinterest in her, because her mind did not want to see that he still cared for her when she could not have him. What a glaring mistake that had been, in retrospect. Her actions then had been no less cruel than when she used to neglect him, entirely. Her words and actions had forced their emotions under pressure, and after three years of bitterness and longing, they could no longer be contained. It had been a wonderful explosion, of course, and she had kissed him then as if she was dying, and his lips were the only thing that could save her. In many ways, such hyperbole seemed accurate with how badly she had ached for him.

Then, reality had intruded. She had a fiance to marry, and Hiccup was the son of the Chief. She could not hold him to an illicit love affair and throw both their reputations into the mud, as badly poor judgment begged her to. She could not have him if her arranged marriage still stoodâ€”but Hiccup had found the solution then, just as he had with the Red Death. He willingly threw himself into an impossible situation with a slim margin of survivalâ€”for her. He had gotten punched, beaten, choked, _stabbed_â€”for her. He had risked his life, nearly losing it altogetherâ€”for her. She had not asked him to. She had not wanted him toâ€”but something needed to be done, and as usual, he was the only one who was going to do anything about it. There were no expectations of himâ€”nothing that required him to step forward and be her saviorâ€”but he loved her. He loved her deeper and more unwavering than she could ever deserve, after everything that had ever transpired between them. So, for the second time, she nearly watched him die, and for the second time, she visited his bedside as he lie there, unconscious.

She found herself alone with him, againâ€”with the exception of the ever-watchful Night Furyâ€”but there were a few changes, that time around. His prosthetic lay on a table beside his bed, instead of fastened firmly to his leg. He was allowed to rest in the privacy of his bedroom, instead of recovering in the middle of his living room for all of Berk's curious onlookers to see. Unlike the first time, Astrid was not hesitant to touch him, and she was not at all shy about lovingly stroking his cheek. She spoke to him often, kissing his lips occasionally and laying her head on his bare chest, listening for his heart and his breathing if he became too still for her liking.

And of course, she had cried for the second time in recent memory.

Her sobs were a lot quieter, and the tears fell a bit slower. She had a better control of her breakdown than she had the very first timeâ€”but she was not able to fight it. For the second time she could remember, she shed tears, and they were for the same Viking that had ripped the sobs from her only three years before that.

"You're such a jerk," she told him. "Why do you keep doing this to me?"

She grasped his hand and held it to her chest.

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that there's no one on this island that is worth even half of you?" she whispered hoarsely, voice thick, "Not even me. I must be st-stupid, falling for such an i-idiot."

She blinked rapidly, spilling a few more tears from her eyes, thankful that only the Night Fury was there to see it. She sniffled and inhaled shakily, trying to slow her sobbing.

"I don't know how I can love you so much, when I hate what you do to me. It doesn't make any s-s-sense," she confessed, before emitting another series of quick sobs.

She laid his hand down gently beside him and brushed his hair back, mindful of the gash on his forehead.

"I hate that I'm so weak for you," she continued, more tears dropping into her lap, "because everyone thinks I'm the st-strong one...but I think we both know that's n-not t-t-true."

Her sobs began to ebb away, leaving only silently streaming tears as her composure slowly returned to her. She pulled the stool closer to the edge of the bed and leaned forward to rest her head on his chest, greatly comforted by the rhythmic beating of his heart. She closed her eyes, sniffing intermittently as the storm of emotions began to ease within her. She dried her eyes by wiping them on the back of her fur-lined bracers.

"Maybe I'm the real idiot," she murmured. "Here I am, bawling over you, and you're never going to know about it, because I'm supposed to be the tough one. I'm not supposed to cryâ€"but then again, you never do play by the rules. That's why you do these stupid, selfless things, isn't it? That's why everyone admires you. That's why you stand out...and Odin, help me, that's why I love your crazy ass, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock."

There came heavy footsteps on the stairs, then, and Astrid sat bolt upright, clearing her throat and straightening her clothes until she looked presentable. Stoick and Gobber came barging in, faces full of concern. They seemed to look right through her, completely oblivious to the fact she had been crying, though it had to be evident all over her features.

"How is he?" Stoick asked. "Any change?"

"Nothing," Astrid replied, "but I don't think he'll be out for too long."

"What makes ye say that?" Gobber asked curiously.

"Because he's the most stubborn Viking I know."

Gobber and Stoick came and went of the course of the next few hours of Hiccup's recovery, but Astrid never left his side, sitting by him

well into the evening. She wanted to be there for him, that time aroundâ€”to be there when he woke up. She wanted him to know that she was not going to cast him aside again. She was his, completely. He had won the right to her, and all of Berk had seen it. He had won her heart long before then, of course, but there was nothing and none to impede them further. He could have her, in every way that he ever wanted, and all the ways he had never once dared to ask her for. He had broken herâ€”her carefully crafted walls and facadeâ€”without even the slightest idea of the effect he had on her. Only his dragon knew, and for Astrid, that was good enough. Every last semblance of apathy and callousness had been obliterated by Hiccup's boundless love for her. He had torn her tough demeanor apart, and so he would have to be the one to put her back together again. After all, he was very adept at fixing things.

When he eventually awoke, as she knew he would, he was none the wiser to the tears that had twice been shed for him. His consciousness returned to him, followed closely by his sense of humor, and in the days that followed, conversation between them resumed to the playful banter of years past. Astrid made a lot of time to visit him, tending to his wounds and keeping his spirits high as he coped with the pain that came with healing and bandage changes. She picked on him, when he was up for it, feeling as though the more playful jabs she made at him, the less he would ever come to suspect she had cried over him.

"At least you made it out with all your limbs this time," she often quipped.

"I think Gobber feels cheated out of another project," he replied, carefully moving his right arm around to keep it mobile.

"I think he takes the apprentice thing a little too seriously. Odin knows, you don't need to start looking like him, too!"

"Come on! We're Vikings. Don't you think it would be an improvement?"

Astrid shuddered at the thought.

"I may just vomit in my mouth," she warned.

Hiccup laughed and Astrid felt herself smile at the sound, automatically. It was so good to hear it again after three years of distance.

"Hiccup," she said, placing a hand on his knee, "you have to promise me you're going to stop trying to get yourself killed all of time. I don't know if I can handle it."

"I'm never trying to get myself killed, Astrid," he replied. "Things just sort of...happen in the most unfortunate ways."

"You know what I mean!" Astrid retorted with a frown. "You just have this psychotic tendency to be so...you."

"There's not much I can do about that, I'm afraid. I tried for about thirteen years to stop being me, and it didn't really work out too well. I only managed to be more...well, me."

Astrid just stared back at him, sighing heavily. Maybe had he known how badly her heart had broken, seeing him lying there so close to death, he would reconsider the dismissive tone in his voiceâ€”but that would involve a confession she was just not willing to make.

"Don't give me a cause to cry over you, Haddock," she said, folding her arms impatiently. "Odin knows, I may not be able to."

It was one of the biggest lies she had ever told.

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling the request by LittleMissLOL9000. She wanted to see Astrid cry, in-character. A very difficult prompt but I do like a challenge from time to time.

So, uh...nailed it? :/ *shrug*

Reviews are welcome _and totally encouraged!_

Thanks! :D

5. A Humble, Unspoken Request

****Author's Note:**** This one-shot is set some time in the two-week period between HTTYD2 and _This Is All Part Of the Grieving Process_.

THIS CHAPTER IS RATED M.

All other chapters have been T so far, so the overall rating for this one-shot collection remains firmly at T, but as per the rules of this site, I have to bump up the fic rating. So, if you are here for just the T-rated stuff, please go ahead and skip this chapter, because it's got plenty of M-rated Hiccstrid in like...a really big way. I don't want to corrupt anyone's pure, virginal mind, is what I'm trying to say.

Okay. For everyone else to whom that warning does _not_ apply, there is Hiccstrid below, because this is me we're talking about, and of course there is. :)

****Disclaimer:**** I don't own the HTTYD franchise. Oh, and did I mention, THIS CHAPTER IS RATED M?

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Hiccup kicked the front door closed behind him, leaning back against it with a weary, defeated sigh. He ran his hand over his face, grimacing at the pounding headache the long day had so generously provided. Sixteen hours he had endured the squabbling of old men, each disagreeing with one another's vision on how Berk should be rebuilt. Sixteen hours he had intermittently raised his voice to regain order, only to be drowned out by more ceaseless bickering. Sixteen long, seemingly endless hours he had been consulted, only to have his advice promptly disregarded as the elder Vikings all clambered for greater influence in the wake of his father's death.

Never mind the fact that Hiccup was the legitimate heir. He was seen as too young and too inexperienced to lead boldly, as his father had done before him—but it was not for a lack of trying. He wanted to point out that his father was about his same age when he had been passed the responsibility of ruling their small, steadfast village, but no one would have taken the time to listen. He would have thought his accomplishments would give him clout among the older men who supposedly respected him for all he had done for Berk, and had dutifully served his father—but politics were a messy affair he was only just beginning to understand. Brithright did not matter as much as who could shout the loudest, and he was painfully reminded of that fact every day.

How was he supposed to lead when the influential men of Berk did not view him as a true Chief? How was he supposed to maintain order and command respect when there was no one in his circle of advisors that was on his side? He was tired of being undermined, and he wished he could just walk away, turning over the responsibilities of Chief to someone who actually coveted it—but he could not do that. It was not in him. His father had believed in him, Astrid believed in him, and so many of the other souls around Berk still looked to him for answers and guidance. There were too many people counting on him for him to throw up his hands and quit. He felt compelled to trudge on, fighting for what was his by blood, and what the rest of Berk had entrusted to him.

"Hiccup, is that you?" his mother's voice drifted from her bedroom.

She stepped out into the common living space, looking concerned by his haggard appearance.

"Are you alright?" she asked, hurrying over to inspect him in that fussy way mothers did—but there were still some maternal instincts left in her, it seemed.

"I'm fine, mom," he replied, gently easing her hands away from his face. He kissed her cheek and edged past her, adding, "It was a long day. That's all."

He was deeply thankful that the gods had seen fit to return his long-lost mother to him after two decades, but twenty years without her still left him feeling guarded with his emotions in her presence. While he could embrace her, and display all the warmth and affection that was expected from a son to his mother, he was not yet ready to confide in this still very strange and unfamiliar woman. It would be a slow, ongoing process to let Valka into the more private parts of his life—the things a natural introvert kept close to the chest.

"I made you some dinner," Valka said, taking a seat at the table, as if she was expecting some deep conversation over a shared evening meal—but he had not even done such a thing with his father.

"I grabbed some dinner before I left the Great Hall," he told her, apologetically. "I didn't know you were cooking. I'm sorry."

Instead of being disappointed, Valka just grinned in amusement.

"Honestly, my cooking is not that bad," she said. "I don't care what Gobber says. Most of the time, it is edible."

Apparently, he had inherited his penchant for self-deprecating humor from his mother, too. Hiccup smiled and shook his head, backing towards the stairs.

"And honestly, mom, I already ateâ€"but thank you."

His prosthetic leg hit the bottom stair, and he was about to turn to make his evening retreat, but Valka spoke again.

"That girl...the blonde that is so very fond of youâ€"she is waiting upstairs, in your room," she said, not yet accomplished at hiding her disapproval for their disregard for the propriety of her day.

Hiccup rolled his eyes and hesitated at the base of the stairs.

"She has a name, mom. It's Astrid. You might want to try calling her that since she's my...you know...since she's frequently here, and everything."

Valka cast him a rueful smile and said, "I didn't know it was commonplace to court young ladies in your bedroom."

He sighed heavily, finding such displays of sudden maternal scrutiny unnecessary, given the twenty years he had survived without it.

"Mom, I'm twenty, in a committed relationship with Astrid Hofferson, and the Chief of Berkâ€"I think that allows me certain freedom with whom I choose to allow in my bedroom," he retorted in a sarcastic tone.

As he hurried up the stairs, Valka called after him, "I suppose I should just keep letting her walk on in, then?"

"Always," he answered. "Whenever she wants."

He disappeared into his bedroom before the conversation with Valka grew anymore uncomfortable. At the rate they were going, he was bound to confess to the intimate nature of his relationship with Astridâ€"though his mother was not naive, and even a simpleton could have guessed what the two of them did behind closed doors. There was just something unsettling about verbalizing his private business to his mother, and he wished to avoid such talk for the time being.

Some of the stress that burdened him lightened considerably upon seeing Astrid sitting on his bed, waiting patiently for him with Sharpshot curled up in her lap. Her face brightened up the moment they laid eyes on each other. It was an automatic response that neither one of them could help. It was as involuntary as breathing.

"Hiccup," she said, cradling his Terrible Terror in her arms as she rose to her feet.

The way she said his name could convey so much. In that moment, it was clear that she was pleased he had come home sooner than she had

anticipated, and that there was not another living soul she would be more excited to see. By walking through the door, he had made her day infinitely better, even for the fleeting hour or two they would share before sleep claimed them. Often, it was not the words they exchanged that were the most meaningful communication they had. Astrid was not the most emotionally expressive woman, but she told him everything he ever needed to know by how she looked at him, and how she spoke to him. As she stood there, smiling at him, she was telling him with her eyes how badly she needed him, if for no other reason than to connect with the one person with whom she could be as vulnerable as she ever allowed herself to be.

Sharpshot perked up and cried happily, scrambling out of Astrid's arms to scurry across the floor. He crawled up his human's body, settling on Hiccup's shoulder as he waited expectantly for attention.

"Well, it's good to see you, too," Hiccup told the Terrible Terror, scratching the small dragon's head affectionately.

Satisfied, the tiny dragon hovered across the room to the nest he had built for himself in the far corner, basking in the warmth of the candles that enveloped the room in their soft, golden glow.

"Where's Toothless?" Astrid asked curiously.

She strode over to Hiccup, helping him make quick work of shedding the extra layers of leather garb he wore atop his usual attire.

"I set him loose for the night," he answered. "He's probably chasing deer through the woods."

"Or getting a little late night romancing from Stormfly," Astrid replied casually, with a shrug.

Hiccup stared at her sardonically and she just snickered at his expression. He did not know why she insisted there was anything going on between their dragons, but he supposed she enjoyed the reaction she got from him every time she brought it up.

"Come on, Hiccup, you have to admit...a bunch of baby Night Nadders would be something to seeâ€"or would you call them Deadly Furies?" Astrid mused.

Freed of his riding gear, he gathered the various pieces of leather and stored them away in the wooden chest at the foot of his bed.

"Neither," he answered flatly, latching it shut, "because it's impossible."

Astrid laughed and sauntered up behind him, wrapping her arms around him as he stood back up. Her hands slid over his chest in the most tantalizing manner, systematically working their way lower on his body, teasing him through the thin fabric of his tunic. The sensual dancing of her fingers normally ignited the blood in his veins, but for whatever reasonâ€"by no fault of his loverâ€"he only felt a slight stirring in his heart at her eager touch. Sighing, he gently pried her hands off of him, turning to face her.

"How was your day, milady?" he asked softly.

"Oh, you know...chipping away at Bewilderbeast ice...stuffing small shards down the back of Snotlout's tunic, when he wasn't looking...the usual," she replied casually.

She inched closer, simultaneously pulling him towards her in a gesture that left no doubt about what she wanted from him.

"Missing you..." she confessed, "as sappy as it is to say."

"I'm sorryâ€" he began, but Astrid shook her head.

"Don't do that," she said. "Don't apologize to me for doing your job. You're the Chief, Hiccup. I didn't really expect anything differentâ€"at least, not during this adjustment period. Don't worry about me, I'll manage."

He gave her a small smile, appreciating her inextinguishable support. So solid and steady in her own emotions, Astrid was his crutch when he needed it most. Even if the entire world suddenly saw him as a miserable failure, she would still stand beside him, shouting his praises to anyone that listened. He did not take that for granted.

"I'm proud of you, Hiccup," she told him, placing a hand on his chest, bracingly. "You know that...don't you?"

"Yes," he answered, "And you know that I love you, don't you?"

Astrid grinned broadly as their lips hovered inches apart.

"Yes," she whispered.

They kissed deeply and before long, Astrid was trying to steer him backwards, towards the bed, with her hands in his hair. As expected, she was forceful and eager, driving things along at the faster, rougher pace she found the most comfortable. It was how she went about most things, and intimacy was no different. Her tongue teased his bottom lip, asking him to surrender his mouth to her as he had done countless time before. It was both easy and satisfying to allow her fire to consume him, on most occasions. Between the two of them, Astrid was more demanding and particular, and he was more flexible and compromisingâ€"but that night, he did not feel so agreeable. That night, he wanted to chase a different kind of thrillâ€"to call the shots. All day long, he had been disrespected and walked overâ€"his authority disregarded. Not that Astrid's dominant sex drive was in any way comparable to the egos and power-grabbing of a bunch of ornery old men, but Hiccup was tired of others trying to wrestle control away from him. Even the commanding way in which one of Astrid's hands dropped down to tug at his clothes was asking him to be more passive than he had any remaining patience for.

He ignored the hand demanding him to strip, and cupped Astrid's face firmly with his own hands. He kissed her harder, and more aggressively than he usually would. He felt her try to pull back in surprise, by the slightest of margins, but when he slid his tongue into her mouth, Astrid moaned softly in the back of her throat. She leaned into him, grabbing fistfuls of his tunic again, but more to

hold steady against the heady rush of desire than anything else. He had initiated kisses beforeâ€"stolen as many from his lover as she had taken from himâ€"but, in that instance, the way he was claiming her lips was uncompromising. It did not matter that Astrid wanted things her way, and that he would have enjoyed himself if he gave in to her. As he continued to dominate their kiss, unyielding in spite of the quiet whimpers against his lips, it validated him to command _some _level of control over even one aspect of his abysmal day.

It was then that he felt his desire begin to burn. It was a different kind of high entirely, to be the forceful one, and he understood why his lover found it so appealing. Usually, he either gave into whatever Astrid wanted, or their passions were equally matchedâ€"the latter being the more typical, mutually satisfying outcome. In two years, he had never forced himself on his lover beyond an unexpected kiss and telling her plainly that he wanted herâ€"not that he could recall an instance in which she would have denied him had he tried a more aggressive approach. As much as she liked to tease that he could not resist her, the very same was true of her attraction to himâ€"but it was simply against his principles to take what he wanted without going through the necessary, polite steps to get it, first. He was not that kind of "alpha-male" that one might find strutting around Berkâ€"his cousin, being a prime example of such a man.

"Hiccup...?" Astrid asked softly as they broke apart for air.

Their eyes locked as they considered one another, both slightly breathless. While his actions suggested a far less gentle demeanor, Hiccup knew he could never convey that same feeling with his eyesâ€"Astrid could always read him in them. Or, at the very least, her interpretation was often eerily accurate. He also shared a similar gift, howeverâ€"clearly understanding the confusion and shadow of excitement flickering in her deep, blue eyes as she gazed back at him.

"Sorry," he murmured, choosing to address her bewilderment. "I know this isn't usually how thingsâ€"I...I just..."

"Rough day?" she interjected, caressing the side of his face with a warm smile.

"You could say that," he replied, taking her hand and kissing her fingertips in an affectionate manner that was much more familiar to the both of them.

"You know..." she began, a sly grin spreading across her face, "I think I get it."

He felt relieved. The longer they were together, the less really needed to be saidâ€"not that words did not have their effectiveness, or the occasional unburdening of one's soul was not particularly therapeutic. In certain situations, however, it was simply more comfortable for the discussion to be mainly nonverbal. They had come a long way from the days of _Vetrnaetr_ two years past, where Astrid had implored him to be more forthcoming with his feelings. Sometimes, when his thoughts ran deeper than the emotions playing out on his face, she still prodded him to speak candidly, but it had become normal, however, for her to pick up on what lingered right beneath his calm, composed silence. He did not want to relive his miserable day and failings, nor did he want to explain how it had led him to

crave any feeling of empowermentâ€”in whatever manner he was able to obtain it. He wanted Astrid to be his remedy, as she had been so many times before. She was often the cure for his woes in any way he required, and she seemed to know just what he needed, exactly when he needed itâ€”even if he would not admit to those needs aloud.

Astrid reached down and attacked the fastenings of Hiccup's pants, gazing at him in the challenging way she did whenever they engaged in a dragon-related competition of superiority.

"You don't have to ask for my permission, Hiccup. Ever," she said in a sultry whisper. "You already have it. You can just take what you want. I can't think of too many instances where I'd turn you down."

He appreciated the sentiment, but it just was not in his natureâ€”still, she had given him the permission he needed, at that moment, to pretend that it was. He grasped her wrists, pulling her hands away from his pants, and with a few steps forward, he backed her against the wall near the foot of his bed. Far from looking alarmed, she stared up at him, intrigued.

"I want you to take off your clothes," he told her, releasing her wrists and placing his hands against the wall on either side of her head. Deciding the command still sounded a bit weak, he added, "All of them. Now."

When she hesitated, grinning playfully as she tested his patience, he could not help but break the act with a smirk.

"Don't make me ask nicely," he warned, sarcastically, "because I will."

They both laughed softly, and then Astrid complied. She started with her braid, undoing it carefully, before she began to discard each article of clothing, one by one. It was a very new kind of enticing to watch his lover undress just inches from him, exposing her bare skin as she remained "trapped" between his arms. He could only watch, transfixed, as each garment hit the floor.

She was perfect. Every time he saw her naked, the same thought echoed in his head. It was as if the gods, at the time of her creation, looked into the future and made all that was Astrid from the fabric of his fantasies. There was no better explanation for itâ€”for how every curve of her body never failed to excite him. It was a deeper arousal beyond the appreciation of a stunningly gorgeous woman. It was a desire for what was flawless, and what was his. Completely nude, she stared back at him, unashamed.

"My Chief is satisfied, I take it?" she asked smugly, hands on her hips.

"Even more so if you don't call me that," he replied.

"It's who you are, Hiccup," she said, pressing her body into hisâ€”it was distracting.

"Not when I'm with you."

She leaned in and whispered in his ear, "But right now, I want you to

be."

The words hit him right between the legs, and his lips were instantly on hers again, silencing any further flirtation. She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying a hand in his hair—"she did seem to have some kind of "a thing" for it. In two years, kissing Astrid had not yet lost its appeal, and he doubted it ever would. His hands were on her hips, pulling her impossibly closer, desperate to feel every bit of her. She struggled against him, of course, fighting his tongue and his grip to regain the upper hand, in spite of her moans. She could have easily freed herself—he was very much aware of his girlfriend's ability to take him down, if she wanted to—but she was playing along, happily. She squirmed only as much as was necessary to keep it exciting, and he doubted she was ignorant to the effect all the additional friction was having on him. His pants were already uncomfortably tight, and the way Astrid was deliberately rubbing up against him was only making it worse.

He pulled back long enough to remove his tunic and Astrid ran her hands over him, hungrily. Never, in all his awkward teenage years, would he have imagined anyone could want him so much—"Astrid, least of all. He was far from what came to mind as desirable—or rather, he had been for so many years. It was difficult to completely shed all feelings of worthlessness that had been mercilessly drilled into him since he had developed enough of an understanding to realize what it was that made him so different—that had made him so despised. To think that Astrid, once the very embodiment of traditional Viking values, had come to love all it was that set him apart from the rest of his tribe, was surprising. But it was not just her. Suddenly, there had been advances thrown at him from the most surprising of places, and the parents of more than one eligible young maiden had approached his father on the business of marriage contracts. To Stoick's credit, he had turned these offers down. For all their misunderstandings, there was one thing the former Chief could not overlook, and that had been Hiccup's feelings for Astrid, in spite of all the bitter drama that had once transpired between them.

That was in the past, though. Thank Odin. In the present, it was his bed she frequented, and his heart she held in her care. The way she looked at him then, as her fingers danced over his chest, was an expression he used to only see in his dreams—the kind to which he was far too proper to confess. The kind of dreams that used to wake him with nothing but an aggravated groan and frustration, as he kicked off his blankets while Toothless stared back at him in the darkness, silently judging him—or at least, Hiccup was convinced that he did as he projected his own feelings of shame and embarrassment on to his dragon.

As Astrid touched him, he trailed his hands down her back. If she wanted a moment to caress and admire his body, he would not interrupt her. After all, it had once been all he ever wanted, to be the object of her affection. She did not mind his scars or imperfect physique. He was exactly what she desired, and so there was no other way he would rather be. After years of being ignored or insulted, it filled him with a sense of pride and validation to matter so much to someone. To be Astrid's only one—the only man who had ever touched her. The only man who had ever loved were some things—carnal things—that spoke to whatever inherent masculine urges he possessed. The knowledge that he, alone, could please and satisfy his lover was one such notion integral to what made him feel like a man.

In the recent days of being disrespected, condescended, and marginalized as the new and inexperienced Chief, he clung to the moments in his life where he felt truly in control of something.

"Tell me you want me," he murmured, bringing one hand between her thighs. "Tell me how badly you need this."

Perhaps it was asking a bit too much to expect Astrid Hofferson to beg for him, but he would take any admission of desire she gave him. He was not used to giving her orders when it came to sex, and the words sounded a bit foreign coming from his mouth.

"Hiccup...don't," she hissed, trying to grind down against his hand, seeking that contact. "Don't tease."

"That's not how this works," he retorted.

Astrid practically growled in frustration and he grinned. Ever since their relationship had become physically intimate, she had been quite fond of his hands, and what he could do with them, in particular. In all honesty, whatever technique he had developed had been through trial and error—“who else could he have possibly gone to for advice on sex he was not supposed to be having? He had not expected he had any hidden talents in the bedroom, but he had been both pleasantly surprised and delighted to discover he was wrong—“though, probably not as much as Astrid had been.

Her head fell back against the wall with a soft _thump_ and she closed her eyes with a faint groan.

"_Please_, Hiccup," she said. "If you don't know I want you by now, then there's no hope for you."

He could not help but laugh softly, and Astrid even cracked a smile. It was hard to stay completely in-character when they were nothing but a couple of love-drunk fools, but her half-hearted plea was sufficient enough for him. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her neck as he slid his fingers into her, relishing the combination of startled gasp and wanton moan that escaped her.

"Yes..." she whimpered, gripping his shoulders tightly as she fought the weakening of her knees.

His right shoulder twinged a bit as she squeezed, but he ignored the old injury, far more concerned with moving his fingers in whatever way that made her come undone. She arched back against the wall, pushing her hips down against his hand as he worked her sex in the expert way he had long since memorized. The speed, the twist and rubbing of his fingertips inside her, the way his thumb teased that sensitive bundle of nerves that made her moan and writhe against him—“it was all second nature to him, and it was all so amazing with the effect it had on Astrid. She was beautiful—“flawless, even—“eyes shut tight with her head tilted back against the wall. He could have stayed there all night if it meant Astrid would be satisfied. It was comforting to know, in the pursuit of his own sexual dominance, he could still please her in the process. For that, he was glad, or else his own desires would have been meaningless. She was making the most enticing little noises while her chest heaved in pleasure. The way she would arch her back pushed her breasts towards

him, and he could not resist what was being so willingly offered to him. He brought his other hand to her breasts, caressing each one as he shifted the hand between her legs, pushing his fingers in at a newer, deeper angle that had her cry out.

"It's...it's so..." she panted, desperately grasping at him for something to tether her to the ground, but all she could grab was skin and hair.

Her eyes were glazed over, and she seemed to be somewhere else, teetering out at the very edge of reality. She was going to tumble over the edge into the sea of infinite pleasure and release, and he wanted her to do it. It would be paying him the ultimate compliment, as his lover.

"Do it, Astrid," he whispered in her ear. "Do it for me now, and before we're done, I will make you shout my name a second time."

That was enough.

"_Hiccup_!" she cried, pushing off from the wall to throw herself against him.

She tensed for only a moment, then she was overcome by luscious spasms that coursed through her entire body. She clung to him and he wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her close and steady as she rode the waves of her orgasm. Her face was pressed into his neck as she was, momentarily, transported elsewhere—to a place he hoped very soon visit for himself. He continued to touch her in a much slower, gentler rhythm as she gradually came back down from the height of ecstasy. A comfortable quiet descended over the room, with the only sound of significance being Astrid's soft moans against his skin.

"I...I fucking love your hands," she whispered breathlessly, a couple more shudders passing through her.

"I've noticed," he replied with a grin, stroking her hair with his far less occupied hand.

From the very corner of his bedroom, by the bedside table with the candle, came an irritable grunt that caught Hiccup by surprise, nearly making him jump. He glanced over his shoulder at Sharpshot, who was glaring at them both impatiently. The tiny dragon was not amused by their lustful antics and the sleep he had lost as a result.

"Well, by all means, feel free to leave," he told the Terrible Terror sarcastically, gesturing towards the window that was, at the moment, shut tight.

The dragon just snorted and turned his back to them, curling up even tighter in an effort to block them out. Astrid just snickered softly, having regained enough of her composure to stand up straight, without support.

"I guess you can't train dragons to get used to _some_ things," she quipped.

"Perhaps, but you would think he would get the idea by now," Hiccup replied, taking her by the hand.

"Oh? What idea would that be?" she asked as he led her towards the bed.

"This is my room, and you belong to meâ€"and I'm going to do whatever I'd like to you, for as long as I'd like to do it," he answered.

It sounded bizarre to hear himself talk that way. He was behaving contrary to everything he normally valuedâ€"tenderness, selflessness, and restraintâ€"but Astrid just smiled, playing along.

"And what would my Chiefâ€" "

Hiccup frowned at her use of the word. It really was a buzz-kill for him.

"â€"have me do?" Astrid asked, tugging at his undone pants in a way that suggested she already knew.

He sat down on the edge of his bed, reaching down for his prosthetic, but Astrid knelt in front of him, beating him to it. He sighed and leaned back against his hands as she removed his metal leg, making quick work of his pants and underwear next. Throwing the unwanted clothing aside, she then reattached his prosthetic with care, handling and caressing the limb far more than he felt was really necessary, but it still fascinated him how enamored she could be with it, at times. Her hands slid up his legs, coming to rest on his knees as she gazed intently up at him. He placed a hand on the back of her head pointedly, but did little else than stroke her hair affectionately.

"You know what I want," he said firmly to maintain the act, but the statement was deliberately vague and open-ended, giving Astrid the option to refuse, if she was so inclined.

"Always do," she replied, smugly.

Without further hesitation, she settled between his legs and took every inch of him into her mouth. The sensation was like lightning surging through every nerve in his body, and he tilted his head back, letting out a throaty moan, as his fingers wound themselves in Astrid's long, blonde hair. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the intense pleasure as she found the perfect pace, coupled with all the tantalizing flicks of her tongue. He had never been with anyone elseâ€"had no desire to beâ€"but he doubted there was another woman who could ever know his body as well as Astrid did. With every skilled bob of her head, he felt as though he might come unhinged. It was difficult to feel stressed about anything when her mouth was on him. It did not matter that he struggled for respect and recognition from his supposedly closest advisers on an almost daily basis. In that bedroom, there was only one person in the entire cosmos that mattered, and she thought the world of himâ€"would do anything for him. Whenever Astrid looked at him, he could see in her eyes the man he wanted to be. It was the man she saw in him, and he would live his entire life trying to be that person, for she deserved nothing less than the absolute best of him.

"_Stop!_" he said urgently, nearly losing it from the vibrations as

she moaned softly around him.

With one last sweep of her tongue, she pulled back and gazed up at him from the floor, looking rather pleased with herself.

"You can be so predictable," she told him teasingly.

He quirked an eyebrow at her and replied, "Oh, really? Stand up, then."

Astrid did as he commanded, and he immediately grabbed her by the waist, tossing her as gently as he could against the bed. She let out a small yelp of surprise as she fell, quite unceremoniously, against the covers. She glared back at him a little indignantly, but he just grinned, knowing there was no real malice behind it. As he crawled over her, he thought she looked absolutely gorgeous, sprawled out naked in his bed with her face framed by her flaxen hair shimmering in the candlelight. He laid down on top of her, and her arms came around him at once. They kissed softly at first, and for a moment, Hiccup enjoyed the sensation of their bodies pressed together. For a moment, he thought he could stay like that forever—holding Astrid and reveling in the feeling of every inch of her against every inch of him—but there was a need gnawing at the core of him that eventually won out. As patient as he was, there were certain things that even he could not ignore.

He lowered his head to her breasts, paying them proper attention with his mouth as his hand slipped down between Astrid's legs again. He was rewarded with a strangled moan as she arched her back and fisted her hands in the covers.

"Hiccup...just do it," she groaned softly. "You...you don't have to be sweet about it."

He gazed up at her and she stared back at him through eyes half-lidded with desire.

"I don't intend to be," he replied.

She looked down at him quizzically, but he did not give her much time to contemplate his response. He positioned himself between her thighs, and without any real forewarning, he buried himself inside of her with one, firm push. They both moaned in unison, and it was perfection.

"_Yes!_" Astrid hissed, wrapping her legs around him.

He shared the sentiment, but he was less concerned with speaking than he was with another hard thrust of his hips. Astrid gasped, bracing her hands against the headboard, and for a moment he was concerned he had caused her some pain or discomfort, but she only seemed more aroused by the rougher love-making.

"Harder..." she whispered, putting any fears to rest.

He furrowed his brow in lingering doubt, but did as his lover requested. He slid a hand beneath her hips, holding on to her tightly as he drove into her more forceful than before. It felt wonderful to him, but it was Astrid's look of immense pleasure that encouraged him more than anything else. It did not matter that he had been calling

the shots. There was one fact that would never change—her needs first, and his second. It was only an added bonus that Astrid took such pleasure from the fulfillment of his own desires. With a hard, steady rhythm, he took from her what he wanted—what he needed—and she was so deeply satisfied by the change of pace. He was as captivated by her response to him as he was by the sensation of it all. She was ablaze for him, and as shamelessly indulgent of his body as she ever was. It allowed him to take her with complete abandon, knowing that whether it was more of his pleasure or her pleasure, it did not matter. They would both be mutually fulfilled. In the throes of passion, their satisfaction was the same.

Time was completely irrelevant in the sea of sensations that had swallowed them. There was the warmth of the candle and the heat generated by the both of them. The faint, flickering flame cast a dreamlike, golden glow on the walls, the ceiling, the floor...as well as the sweat-slicked bodies wrapped desperately around one another. There was the sound of Astrid's soft whimpers mingling with Hiccup's heavy breathing, somehow audible in spite of the bed's creaking protest. The taste of Astrid's skin and the sight of her completely lost in him drove Hiccup closer to his own release. All around them, assaulting their senses, was nothing but all the sights, sounds, tastes, and textures of sex.

As suddenly as before, Astrid tensed up all around him, pulling him closer and deeper in a way that left him breathless. She shouted his name in a muffled cry, face pressed into his shoulder, and he could no longer hold back his own release as his lover came for him a second time. He, too, threw a hand up against the headboard, sighing Astrid's name as they fell, together, into that small slice of pleasurable infinity. They both lost all control, swept up in the rush of immeasurable ecstasy as their consciousness mingled far out on some distant shore, unreachable by reality. It was blissful and satisfying—a sense of completion that was not obtainable by any other means. Hiccup could have stayed there, as long as Astrid was with him, but there was some inevitable gravity that always brought him crashing back to the world.

He could not recall when he had laid his head on Astrid's chest, but her heartbeat and the gentle touch of her fingers combing through his hair first captured his attention. He opened his eyes slowly and took a deep breath of total contentment, his brain not yet functional enough for speech. He lifted his head up to gaze at Astrid, and she was smiling back at him, her blue eyes filled with warmth and adoration.

"That was amazing," she said, tugging on one of his braids.

"My pleasure," he murmured. "Or yours...whichever. Same difference, really."

Astrid laughed softly and caressed the side of his face. He leaned into her touch, feeling as though the whole rest of the island could have caught fire around them and he would not have it in him to care. It would be someone else's concern—he could be Chief again in the morning.

"Did you...get what you needed?" Astrid asked curiously.

He smirked and answered, "And then some. Thank you."

She grinned broadly and replied, "You really have to stop thanking me for sex, Hiccup. It's not really doing you some big favor if I'm also in it to get mine."

He leaned up and kissed her forehead before lying down beside her.

"Then don't think of it as thanking you for sex," he said. "It's more of a 'thank you for indulging me' when I come at you with some strange, new request."

She rolled onto her side, shuffling back against him until they were comfortably molded together like two pieces of a puzzle.

"I don't mind. You rarely ask me for anything," she told him as he draped an arm over her.

"I don't have to," he murmured as sleep began to overtake him. "You already give me everything..."

His eyelids grew heavy and as they fell closed, he heard Astrid snicker to herself.

"What?" he whispered, battling his exhaustion for a few moments longer.

"So, I guess I just made it with the Chief of Berk? Kind of scandalous, when you think about it."

Hiccup just gave a faint chuckle and replied, "No, Astrid. The Chief of Berk just made it with you."

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****Author's Note****: And there you have it, the smluffy one-shot that changed the rating of this entire collection, complete with M-rated vagueness and euphemisms. Fulfilled the request by Akai Tsuki for a dominant!Hiccup sexy stress-relief ficâ€”or rather, as dominant as I could comfortably make him and still keep him somewhat in-character while he's acting intentionally out-of-character. Sooo, I hope this lives up to your expectations, friend? Sorry if he isn't as dominant as you would've liked me to make him, but I mean...this is Hiccup, we're talking about. I could only push it so far without going, "Pfffffft! No way."

6. Unorthodox

****Author's Note**** Back to T-ratings...for now, anyway. This one-shot takes place during the timeframe of my very first fic, Affairs Of the Heart, And Other Things Vikings Don't Talk About ****.**** It takes place after the last chapter, but before the epilogueâ€”it also predates Awkward In The Best Possible Way. Hiccup and Astrid are newly together, but they have not yet been physically intimate at this point. Just more workinf through the kinks of new romance. They are both 18.

****Disclaimer**** I don't own HTTYD, but sometimes I really wish that I did.

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There was no denying that the way Astrid chose to communicate and express affection was a bit unorthodox. A punch to the arm or shoulder could convey a wide range of emotions from "I think you're an idiot" to "I sort of, kind of love you right now"â€"and just about everything in between. It was not that she had any sort of reservations about speaking her mind. She was one of the most forthcoming people she knewâ€"unless it involved deep, sentimental subject matter. It was just one more way she and Hiccup differedâ€"had _always_ differed.

Astrid could easily share her thoughts, making her opinions and desires known in a very matter-of-fact way. Reputed to be loud and outspoken, if she was mad, she would share exactly why she was so miffed. She would lay out the facts as if she was reciting a to-do list, _if_ she was not busy throttling the object of her irritation. But that was the extent of it. Any deeper probing of feelings left her unusually silent and uncomfortableâ€"remnants of the tough exterior of her earlier years. She was content to share the 'why' of her emotions, but not how they affected her, or how strongly she felt them. If she wished to communicate a particularly potent sentiment, a punch to the arm would often suffice, and the recipient was left to determine where the blow fell on the spectrum of feelings. Hiccup, however, was the opposite. On the whole, he kept his thoughts to himself, often retreating inward for deep contemplationâ€"the remnants of being a social outcast. Astrid had watched him for years, wondering what was going on in his brilliant mind whenever he looked particularly pensive. If asked, he was quick to respond with "nothing important" or "it really doesn't matter", but Astrid knew there was a vast sea of thoughts and emotions under his calm, genial facade. She had tapped into it on occasion, and once Hiccup was persuaded to be forthcoming, he could easily articulate his feelings in a way Astrid could not. She admired him for it. There had to be some measure of relief that came with candor of feeling.

She certainly needed to unburden her soul. While she was elated to finally be with Hiccup, she felt there was a dark cloud that hovered over herâ€"one that she tried to ignore, since admitting its existence made her feel weak. There was a lot of lingering emotions since the fight between Stronggut Svenson and Hiccupâ€"guilt, anger, anxiety, just to name a few. As a matter of fact, she was still weighed down by the unresolved frustration and regret of three years of distance from the person she truly loved. She carried all of that negativity around, day to day, dampening her otherwise bright mood. Most people did not noticeâ€"too wrapped up in their own concerns to think that Astrid might be carrying any underlying troubles. After all, did she not voice her complaints? That was the perception, anyway. She did not hesitate to admit she was in a sour mood, beneath the smile she wore, in the event anyone bothered to ask, but she was not at all tempted to share why. It involved too much vulnerability, too much candidness, and too much of everything that made her squirm. Therefore, her feelings went unresolved, and most everyone was fooledâ€"except Hiccup, perhaps. It should have been easy to discuss those feelings with him, since there was no one else on Berk who could better understand and empathize. If she could not turn to him, she had nowhere else to go, but besides confessing she had some remaining issues with how events had unfolded, she could not bring herself to be more vulnerable. Not even for Hiccup, who was probably

the least judgmental soul she knew, and completely deserving of her total honesty.

"Have you...heard anything I've said?" Hiccup asked, snapping her out of her silent musings.

She glanced up from across the table, noticing he was staring straight at her with a quirked eyebrow and his charcoal pencil poised over a page in the Book of Dragons. Typically, Fishlegs kept the old tome, but whenever it needed updating, Hiccup was usually the Viking to do it.

"Was it something about dragons?" she replied, smiling innocently.

He rolled his eyes payfully and set the pencil down before closing the book in front of him.

"It may surprise you that, on occasion, I have been known to talk about something other than dragons," he said. "This comes as a shock to a lot of people. Feel free to sit down, if you feel lightheaded."

Astrid laughed at his sarcasm and pulled a woolen blanket tighter around her body. It was late summer, but Berk was far from a tropical paradise. Winds from the North had blown in a bitter storm, dropping the temperature throughout the archipelago. The leaves on the trees had already begun to change, and she anticipated the quick approach of winter that year. She had all but forgotten the howling winds and thick sheets of hissing rain battering the village, but a sudden clap of thunder rudely reminded her of the storm raging outside. She had been caught in the torrential downpour, when the skies had suddenly opened up over Berk. She imagined she looked rather pathetic, knocking on Hiccup's door, drenched to the bone. He had been perplexed, but no less delighted to see her, immediately inviting her inside and out of the dismal weather. It been awkward to find herself standing in the Chief's house for the first handful of times, after the svipting, but she and Hiccup had already been together for a month, and it had become completely natural to be wherever he was, regardless of the location.

"Is something bothering you, Astrid?" Hiccup asked, and the concern on his face was genuine.

She sighed heavily, though it was drowned out by another roll of thunder. He had asked her that very same question, more than once, and Astrid did not know if she was more exasperated by the question itself, or that Hiccup was so eerily perceptive. The only indication she ever gave that something was amiss was her intermittent, thoughtful silence. Apparently, for Hiccup, it was enough of a hint. It was amazing how, after only four short weeks of dating, he came to know her so well.

"It's nothing that hasn't already been on my mind," she answered, waving her hand dismissively. "It's been a crazy few years, hasn't it?"

It was yet another truthful admission of what was playing out on the surface of her emotions, without revealing anything deeper, or meaningful.

"A bit of an understatement, but yes," he replied.

A powerful gust of wind rattled the front door in its frame, and Astrid automatically inched closer to the fire blazing in the hearth. Whenever it stormed on Berk, it did not matter where one sought shelter—the damp chill in the air permeated everything. Still, it felt warmer in Hiccup's house than anywhere else on the island, but Astrid suspected it was for reasons beyond a simple fire and a wool blanket.

She glanced over at Hiccup, only to find him lost in his own thoughts, brow furrowed. It was not a look that was unusual for him, but he had so recently been in talkative mood.

"Astrid..." he said softly, after a moment, "you know you can tell me anything, don't you?"

She was taken aback.

"Well, sure I do. I tell you just about anything that comes to mind already," she replied.

"But not everything?" he asked, gazing up at her intently.

She instantly felt defensive, which was utterly ridiculous considering she was with Hiccup, of all people. There was nothing accusatory in his eyes—only a glimmer of regret.

"Do you tell me everything?" she retorted.

"I...I try to," he answered, "whenever you ask."

She folded her arms across her chest stubbornly, beneath the blanket. She was trying to throw up her walls again, which had protected her all throughout her childhood and early teenage years. There was no sense to it when she was alone with Hiccup, but it was a defense mechanism as involuntary as breathing. So newly in love, there were still things to learn, roles to define, and boundaries to test.

"You mean whenever I'm forced to nag," Astrid said, frowning. "I don't see the point in digging too deeply when I've already told you what's on my mind. That's more forthcoming than you can claim to be, on most occasions."

"I guess," he replied, sounding a little disappointed in her attitude. "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't me."

Astrid felt a stab of guilt. Hiccup could crumble her defenses with a simple statement. It was not fair.

"I wanted to make sure we were still alright," he continued. "That you hadn't...reconsidered things. I know it's probably stupid of me, but after the past three years, I have a lingering fear we might go back to that. I'm not sure I'd survive it. Your silence lately has me a bit paranoid."

The more desperately she tried to prop up her walls, the faster he managed to tear them down. Only Hiccup could have that effect on her. His doubts of her love for him only magnified the other negative

feelings she had tried to squash out of her consciousness, making her feel impossibly worse. He was so expressive, whenever he felt inclined to share, and yet Astrid never viewed him as emotionally weak or vulnerable. Surely, logic would dictate, if one could be as strong as Hiccup and manage to confess their feelings, it should have been no problem for Astrid to do the same—but she had always equated her own strength of character with her ability to be physically, mentally, and emotionally tough. She was not sure she even knew how to display weakness without falling entirely to pieces. It served her well once, but in her relationship, it was miserable.

"Hiccup, you're one of the only things I've got to feel happy about," she told him. "You're not the issue, here."

"Then, what is?"

"Feelings," she said dramatically, mocking herself.

The rain picked up outside, beating relentlessly against the door and the facade as the winds whipped bands of it about. The thunder continued to roll at a steady pace and Astrid felt the gods were deliberately tormenting her by having the weather reflect her poor mood.

She dropped to the floor in front of the hearth, startling Toothless who had been napping comfortably by the flames. He narrowed his large eyes at her before rolling to face the other direction, turning his back to the two Vikings.

Astrid watched the fire dance and crackle merrily, wishing its warmth could lift her spirits, but she had already confessed that deeper emotions were gnawing at her, making them that much harder to ignore. It was suddenly an inconvenience to find herself in Hiccup's company when she was so gloomy. She could not reflect on her feelings without drawing his attention and concern, and her reluctance to confide her more vulnerable thoughts to him left him to fill in the pieces with his own lingering insecurities—far from what she wanted.

She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her head on top of them. She was so entranced by the dancing flames that she nearly jumped out of her skin with the gentle touch on her back.

"Hiccup!" she gasped, hand over her pounding heart—she had not noticed him move from the table to join her on the floor

"Sorry," he apologized, but he did not withdraw his hand from her.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"If you don't want to talking about those 'feelings' of yours, then this is all I can do," he answered, wrapping her left arm around her.

His right shoulder was still on the mend, so he could only pull her closer with his left hand, and though she was a bit bewildered, she did not resist him. He held her tightly—or as much as he could with his one, good arm—and Astrid felt a warm, tingly feeling radiate

out from the core of her being to the very tips of her fingers and toes. She was curled up against his left side, turned in towards him, with her face pressed against the side of his neck. They had hugged many times before, but it was differentâ€”quick and platonic. The way he was embracing her in that moment was so comforting and affectionate. Astrid could not recall ever being held in such a manner, not even by her parents. In their culture, if a child fell down and scraped their knee, or awoke from a nightmare, it was words of sympathy and reassurance followed by a pat on the head, and that was the extent of it. The child was expected to rebound and carry on as usual. Astrid never felt she had cause to be held with such tenderness, but suddenly, it was the most vital sensation in the entire world. One of her hands emerged from the blanket and gently grasped at Hiccup's tunic.

"Hiccup..." she murmured against his skin.

She hoped the soft whisper of his name was enough to convey how grateful she was for his affection, and how desperately she needed him to keep his arm around her. She was not certain she could tell him that, outright. Or that he felt wonderful. He even smelled wonderfulâ€”a thought that had not previously occurred to her. There was a peace in his embrace, feelings of acceptance and, oddly enough, protection. Astrid would not have assumed that mattered to her, but it put her at ease. Nothing else had changed, but she felt the last bit of her walls collapse. Somehow, cuddled against Hiccup, vulnerability was not so repulsive an idea, but the words did not come easy. Her stomach twisted in anxious knots as she spoke.

"I feel like the last three yearsâ€”everything that happened, I meanâ€”was completely my fault," she confessed. "Every time I think about it, I feel guilty."

It felt like she had just shrugged a heavy load from her shoulders, but she could not bring herself to look at Hiccup, directly. If there was any judgment or amusement in his eyes at the sight of her weakness, she could not bear to see it.

"I don't think being drawn into an arranged marriage was your fault," he replied, gently stroking her back. "Unless I've failed to grasp the concept entirely."

"That's not what I meant," Astrid said with a sigh. The rain continued to assault the Haddock household, and she reflexively snuggled deeper into his embrace. She continued, "I should've told you...about everything."

Hiccup was silent for a moment, and she feared he might agree with her, but just when she began to regret her uncharacteristic openness, he kissed the top of her head. It was a brief gesture of reassurance, but to Astrid, it meant that he was listening, and that he accepted all she was saying.

"You were trying to protect me from the disappointment," he said. "Right or wrong, I think that was admirable, in a way. It would have been a perfectly good plan, had I not already been in love with youâ€”but you didn't know I felt that way."

She had not known at the time, but she had suspected. She had thought it was no more than a crushâ€”an adolescent infatuation that he could

eventually get over with enough time and distance. How wrong she had been.

"I hurt you," she whispered, "and I'm so, _so_ sorry."

That was at the core of everything—the guilt and frustration that weighed her down. His heart had ached because of her. The arranged marriage had been her problem to solve, but he had volunteered himself to take a beating for her. None of it had been intentional, but she could not escape the feelings of selfishness that plagued her. It was difficult enough to verbalize her feelings, but to explain to Hiccup how she felt responsible for all of his suffering made her feel ill. What if she persuaded him to see things the same way? Her first foray into the muddy waters of feeling would only backfire when she had hoped to be healed. Emotions were a painful and messy business, which is why she tried to deal with them in private. What would their relationship gain if she bared her soul to him? She was changing their dynamics already, just a month into their relationship. She was the emotionally fortified one—the one that gave the advice. The one that did not deal with deep feelings. That was supposed to be Hiccup's area of expertise, and yet, there they sat on the floor. Roles reversed. It was foreign. It was uncomfortable. No resolution had yet been reached as Astrid kept peeling back her layers, allowing Hiccup to get closer—far closer than felt natural to her.

She buried her face in his neck completely, wanting to disappear—wanting to drive away the sting of vulnerability. She felt weak and foolish. It was embarrassing and she wished she could take it back—stop the rushing of emotion before she had started it.

"I forgive you," Hiccup said, "and, if I recall correctly, I hurt you too."

She pulled back slowly, staring up at him in confusion. He smiled at her, bringing his hand around to caress her face. It was another sweet gesture that she had not experienced before their relationship. Far from seeming turned off by her emotional side—the small fraction she had let him see—he only seemed to find it more endearing. He made her feel things and want things she did not think someone of her rough, Viking demeanor would ever possibly desire. Closeness, candidness—both new. Both frightening. Was it storming outside? Was it supposed to be cold and dreary? She could not remember. His eyes were distracting.

"You at least tried to keep things friendly between us, and I only shut you out to protect myself. That wasn't fair. I was cold. I can't make a decent excuse for it. I can only apologize," he said.

Astrid shook her head and replied, "I think, at the end of the day, your motivations make more sense than mine."

"I wasn't aware we were competing," he teased, and she was thankful for his attempt to lighten the mood—he just understood her so well.

She relaxed against him and his arm came around her shoulders. She glanced up at his face as she continued, feeling the irrational anxiety of his judgment start to fade. It was easier to let the words flow, since she had opened the proverbial sluice gate.

"I thought things would get better after the _svipting_ was over and you woke up, but there are still people who talk. I try to just ignore it, like I always have, but these comments are different. It's not 'Astrid is too harsh' or 'Astrid only cares about winning' anymore," she said.

"I know. I've heard the whispers," he replied, frowning.

"People have called me aâ€"

"I know," he interrupted. "You don't have to say it, Astrid. It only infuriates me."

"I _didn't_ play you both. I didn't manipulate you into doing anything," she said firmly.

"I know."

"It's not like I derived some kind of sick pleasure from the whole thing!"

"I know."

"It's not like...It's not like it didn't affect me, too. It's not like it was easy for me...to sit there as almost watch you die."

"Astridâ€"

She buried her face in the palms of her hands, the wool blanket slipping down her shoulders. She inhaled deeply as a particularly horrible memory came flashing back.

"It kills me that anyone could think that of meâ€"that I would put you in that position. But, to everyone else, it's my fault. The whole mess. The snide remarks follow me everywhere. It's gotten better over the past couple of weeks, I'll admitâ€"but I still hear it every now and then. It's so hurtful to be so hated for something I didn't doâ€"for something that makes _my_ heart ache," she admitted.

"And this is where I owe you another apology," Hiccup said. "You're getting blamed for my decision. On top of that, while I felt the _svipting_ was necessary, it upset you. Again, my fault."

"You're the 'Pride of Berk'â€"

"Gods, that's no less awkward when you say it."

"â€"and no one is going to blame you for anything. Regardless of the facts, it all just _looks_ badâ€"like I'm the harlot people seem to think I am."

"Don't," he replied. "You are _not_ a harlot. I've been relatively cooped up in my house, dealing with the worst of this injury. When I venture out again, and people see us together, that talk will fade, I'm sure of it. They'll see that we were always inevitable, just like they used to believe before the Svensons ever came into the mix."

He sounded confident, and his eyes were resolute. It was hard to stay

trapped in her own misery and doubt when he was so optimistic. The resolution she had been hoping forâ€”the healingâ€”they had somehow found it, together. Emotions were no more pleasant a territory to traverse, but perhaps it was not as intimidating a place as she had once made it out to be. Hiccup had taken her hand, and led her to the other side with her pride and dignity intact. Before him, she would have never thought it was possible. Vulnerability was still not her favorite sensation, but with Hiccup, perhaps she could learn to accept it. Perhaps she might even learn to display it willingly, of her own accord, without provocationâ€”but in the meantime, one small step in the right direction would suffice. It was all she had the fortitude for. She felt drained and exhausted, but also satisfied, and considerably lighter.

"I...Sorry for just unloading on you like that," she said, grinning sheepishly. "That was a little odd and unexpected."

"I don't mind. I'm glad you did. You could stand to do that more," Hiccup replied.

"Be careful what you wish for! You might stumble on to some parts of me you wished had stayed buried," she teased, nudging him.

"I don't think so," he responded, placing his hand gently on her chest. "I love _all _of you, Astrid. There's nothing in here that can scare me."

If there were different levels of emotional expression, Hiccup had reached the absolute zenith, and Astrid was floundering somewhere close to the bottom. She did not know if she would ever get to where he was, but she realized they could only benefit from her efforts. There was no one else she could confide in. If anyone else ever pried, she would be as tough and unsentimental as ever. Neither her parents nor her friends needed to know that, at heart, she was as sensitive and vulnerable as the next person. There were some things only Hiccup was privileged enough to know, for he was the only one who could truly understandâ€”for his arms were the one place where it was _safe_.

She leaned her head against his chest, listening to the rain patter outside as the storm dissolved into a steady drizzle and the distant roll of thunder.

"Hiccup?" she murmured.

"Hmn?"

She could not punch his right shoulder in its current state, so she settled for nudging him hard in the left shoulder.

"What was that for?" he asked, bemused.

"For being you," she replied nonchalantly.

She grinned at the still puzzled expression on his face knowing that, while he pondered the mysteries of her unusual form of affection, there was only one clear way in which she had meant it.

On the spectrum of feelings, it landed firmly on "I sort of, kind of love you right now."

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****Author's Note****: A quick smattering of feels for another fan, Skullar. The request was for a one-shot in which Hiccup comforts Astrid, instead of the other way around. Also, rainy weatherâ€"because ambiance, that's why. Y'all do seem to be fans of a more vulnerable Astrid. That \$& % it hard to write in-character, my friends! I do try ever so hard.

Cheers!

7. Until Ragnarok Comes For Us

****Author's Note**** M-rated content again, my friends.

This one-shot takes place during the course of One Year And A Dozen Wordsâ€"Hiccup and Astrid are just barely 19 now.

M-RATED CONTENT AHEAD

You should skip this chapter if you are just here for the T-rated stuff.

****Disclaimer****: I don't own the HTTYD franchise. I know. I'm sad about it too, you guys.

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A lot could happen in one year. Integrating dragons into everyday life on Berk was not an overnight process. Changes had to be madeâ€"baby stepsâ€"and even the slightest of alterations had a large impact on such a small, steadfast tribe of Vikings. Suddenly, one had to watch his or her head for low-flying Terrible Terrors, or the poor, unfortunate sheep and shepherds of Berk seldom had days where they were not subject to the sport of young, overzealous dragon riders. The village had to expand to accommodate their large, reptilian companions, and daily Viking life had to completely rearrange in almost every aspect to include dragons. Granted, the changes had been overwhelmingly positive, and four years after the fact, Berk had come a long way from where it had been. Each year saw with it a more dramatic transformation to the village landscape, such as the completion of the communal stables, or the aqueduct and fire prevention system the year before that.

The Dragon Academy had spearheaded most of the progress, under Hiccup's direction, but as Berk evolved, so did the young visionaries that guided it. It had only taken one year of being completely reunited in their effortsâ€"Astrid having been welcomed back after her prolonged absenceâ€"before the carefree and irresponsible whims of earlier adolescence gave way to the priorities of encroaching adulthood. The academy dissolved, and close friendships regressed to regular acquaintances as each of the dragon riders matured along the pursuit of their individual responsibilities and interests. Regrettable. Inevitable. On the increasingly rare instances when they all spent time together, they would still refer to themselves as 'the academy', but it was dyingâ€"had been dyingâ€"a slow death. As the year drew to a close, upon reflection, there was far less change to the village as there had been to the interpersonal relationships of

the teens within it. They all still spoke and hung out on occasionâ€”when boredom mandated itâ€”foregoing social platitudes to recapture as much of the familiar chemistry that had existed before. It was sometimes forced, and often times a shadow of what had once been, but there was comfort in the ability to pretend that, for a moment, they were still the tightly knit group of yesteryear. Another twelve months and Astrid was a bit saddened to think of where they might be.

A year. That was all it had taken for their group to start unravlingâ€”but often in the ashes of one tragedy, something better was built. In one year, all of the hurt stretched over a much longer period of time could be completely resolved, and all but forgotten. Twelve short, busy months had more than healed the deep wounds that Hiccup and Astrid had once inflicted on one another, not so long ago. In fact, Astrid was willing to wager they had turned things around almost instantaneously upon getting together, and within two more months, it had all been entirely forgiven. By the end of the year, it was as if none of itâ€”the pain, the frustration, the unrequited longing of three long yearsâ€”had ever existed. After one whole year, for Astrid, there was nothing else that had ever been, nor could ever be, more significant than her relationship with Hiccup. It had changed her, changed him, and changed themâ€”for the better. It could only have been for the better. In twelve months, Astrid had become softer, and more loving. They influenced each other in the ways they were opposite. Hiccup made her more patient, and marginally more sentimental. She bolstered his confidence, and he spoke with more conviction. He had learned to be more forthcoming with her, and was less prone to acquiesce to the stupidity of the other teens. He had made her more of a lover, and she had made him a better leader. In one year, they were a far cry from the bitter, confused youths they had once been. Astrid could not expend too much energy mourning the weakening ties of less fulfilling friendships when she was so preoccupied with a much sweeter, and more meaningful relationshipâ€”not that the other teens allowed themselves to be completely ignored.

It was her misfortune that her childhood friends were the most notoriously obnoxious collection of dragon riders on Berk. It made intimate moments with Hiccup hard to come by among the jeers, and the seeming omnipresence of at least one of the other teens at any given time. When they could finally manage to find one spot in the village where one of their friends was not lingering around, there was still Gobber, or Stoick, or her parents, or any number of adults that eyed them with scrutiny. One year later, and open displays of affection, beyond simple hugs and chaste kisses, were still unacceptable for the unmarried lovebirds, even if everyone else had their assumptions about went on when the two of them were aloneâ€”which was totally their prerogative, as long as no one could prove it. Stoick knew the truth, of course, and so Astrid suspected Gobber did, alsoâ€”but they would not speak of it, and so Hiccup and Astrid had to act accordingly around Berk, pretending to be the well-behaved virgins of others' expectations. It was frustrating. It reduced their love life mostly to fleeing to isolated places on their dragons, or sneaking around the village under the cover of darkness. Occasionally, they could honestly catch a break during the daylight hours, but it was usually stolen kisses on the run, or hasty making out in the forge, in the small side workshop that more or less belonged to Hiccupâ€”not that the physical aspect of their relationship was all they sought privacy for.

In fact, that was usually the inevitable follow up to the meaningful conversations they shared, and for which they really cared to have no eavesdroppers. Most of their time alone was just as emotionally intimate as it was anything else. In such moments, Astrid was vulnerable and only Hiccup was worthy enough to witness it. He would also confide in her the thoughts, feelings, and concerns he never wanted to be overheard, and so they sought refuge more to be entirely openâ€”to be themselves. Any physical touch that came with it was just an added bonus, when the words ran out but the emotions had not yet lost their potency.

One year had come and gone that way, and though it was exhausting at timesâ€”to publicly be "just dating", but secretly loversâ€”it was still exciting. But Astrid suspected that had more to do with the fact that Hiccup still knew all the right things to say, and could still set her heart ablaze with a look or a touch. Their moments alone together made it all worth itâ€”the remainder of their hours spent keeping up the tiring act of propriety. It made the twelve-month milestone of their relationship all the more significant, to celebrate something that had been so hard-won, and so carefully maintained. Normally not one for things of a hopelessly romantic nature, Astrid would not have assumed an unofficial anniversaryâ€”such as one year of datingâ€”could possibly matter to her. Given all their struggles, however, it seemed strangely appropriate in their case.

"When you told me to meet you 'where we got started', I expected to be on my way to Dragon Island by now. Lucky I saw Toothless headed this way and decided to change course," Astrid said as she dismounted her dragon.

"That may or may not have been deliberate timing on my part," Hiccup teased, patting Toothless on the head.

"So, why here?" Astrid asked, gazing around at the cove. "One year should not have been long enough to make you forget Dragon Island, the _svipting_...there was no cove in any of that."

"You're right," he replied, "but we didn't get started on Dragon Islandâ€”not really. We just picked up where we left off."

Astrid smiled softly and closed the gap between them as their dragons wandered off towards the far side of the cove, clearly uninterested in their riders' romanceâ€”probably the only souls on Berk that could not care less what they did.

"That kiss on Dragon Island wasn't the beginning for you, then?" she asked, standing mere inches from him.

"You've kissed me before," he answered. "The first time was right about...over there."

Astrid smirked as he gestured vaguely towards the edge of the pond.

"That was on the cheek," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"To the fifteen-year-old village embarrassment," he said, tugging gently at the end of her braid, "it was more than enough."

She gazed fondly up at him for his ability to be far more sentimental than her, and typically, far less awkward about it. At least one of them had the natural capacity for romance.

"What makes you think _that's_ when we got started?" she wondered. "We weren't exactly a couple after that."

"Maybe not, but you had me then."

Astrid felt her heart flutter in that giddy, love-struck way no one else had ever managed to make her feel. The rest of the boys in the village were either intimidated by her, or made her feel like she was just another "one of the guys". Snotlout and Stronggut Svenson had been the only other young men that had tried to earn her affection by treating her as a woman—"an object of desire and status to be domesticated, swooning over her husband's muscles. Hiccup was the only person that managed to make her feel feminine in completely tolerable ways—all the ways that she needed.

"It took me a few years to realize it, but I think you had me too," she confessed, reaching up to lovingly caress his face. "But, you know..."

"Stubbornness issues," they said in unison.

They laughed softly and turned to watch their dragons wrestle playfully for a moment, an easy, comfortable silence settling between them. Astrid's hand sought Hiccup's, reaching out to lace their fingers together, and their eyes met, speaking volumes in the peaceful quiet of their semi-isolated cove. They eventually succumbed to the lure of conversation, discussing everything from Berk's latest project to accommodate dragons, to the new reaches of Hiccup's map they had recently charted together, and everything in between. They sat by the edge of the pond, talking for hours. It was effortless—one topic flowing seamlessly into the next. Astrid deeply appreciated the close friendship that existed between them—the foundation on which all of their romance was built. She had seen other women, like Ruffnut, lack a genuine ease to their relationships, filling in the awkward silences with making out and desperate groping, but Astrid could honestly say she enjoyed talking with her lover. Ever since they had first become friends, her conversations with Hiccup had always been a comfortable, natural thing. They took turns patiently listening while the other spoke, laughing at all the appropriate times, and Astrid was sure to punch Hiccup whenever his witty and sarcastic remarks warranted it. Things had been that way since she had first let him in—since she had first seen him for the incredible person he was. A revelation, she remembered, had come about in the very same cove, when she had grabbed him and placed a quick kiss on his cheek for "everything else"—for everything it was that made him wonderful.

Perhaps Hiccup was not being particularly sentimental, then? There was a good bit of truth to his claim that the cove had been their beginning, four summers past—give or take a couple of weeks. Astrid had been unable to admit, in all her pride and ferocity, that she loved him. It seemed too sappy. Too cliché. Too unrealistic—then she had lost her opportunity to be with him for three, miserable years. Her heart went stagnant, though it never lost its love for the young man she could not have. She really _had_ belonged to Hiccup

since that first flight on Toothless, and the whole past year as a new couple had merely been their rekindlingâ€”making up for lost time and giving in to what was always meant to be. If that was truly the case, they were enjoying an anniversary of four years, not one, in spite of all the bumps they had endured along the way. Astrid could never have been anyone else's lover, just as she doubted Hiccup could give himself to any other woman, unless it was forced on him as the future Chief of Berk.

They were both unconcerned with how much time passed as they spent a rather relaxed anniversary in each other's company. They had made no big plans, exchanged no gifts. All they had wantedâ€”all they had planned forâ€”was to spend the afternoon together, alone, without any nagging obligations to cut their rendezvous short. They been sure to free themselves from any personal responsibilities for the day.

"I can't imagine the talk back on Berk right nowâ€”the sun's beginning to set and we're still gone," Astrid said.

"It's probably more of the sameâ€”rumors and assumptions that no one can prove. Gossip has been in short supply lately. I wish they had something else to talk about," Hiccup replied.

"Wedding season is around the corner. It's going to get worse before it gets better," she muttered.

Hiccup sighed heavily.

"'Son, yer a man nowâ€”and the future Chief of Berk. I think it's time ye consider askin' Astrid fer her hand'," he said, in an uncanny imitation of his father.

Astrid laughed and asked, "Has that been an actual conversation?"

"On more than one occasion," he answered, flatly.

"I suppose it's only marginally better than talk of learning to cook and sew and do laundry. You know, all those domestic skills necessary for the 'Chief's wife'."

He frowned and replied, "I don't want you any different than you areâ€”than who you've been this past year. That's you, Astrid. That's who I'm going to marry."

She raised her eyebrows at him and he appeared to mentally curse himself.

"That's notâ€”I didn't mean...it's your choice. I'm not trying to assumeâ€”"

"Assume away, Hiccup," she interrupted. To lighten the mood back to the usual dismissive way they joked about marriage, she added, "I mean, you've already stuck it out for one year, already. A lesser man could not have handled me."

He laughed softly and she smiled.

"It certainly hasn't been easy," he teased. "Several times, I nearly reconsideredâ€”"

"Oh, what_ever_," Astrid retorted, giving him a hard shove.

He put up no resistance and grinned as he toppled over onto the grass, staring up at the colorful bands of sunset. Astrid stretched out beside him, gazing up at the few bright stars that were already visible in the retreating daylight.

"I can't believe it's only been a year," she said. "All of that mess seems so long ago."

"It does," Hiccup agreed. "From another life, almost."

His left hand came to rest absent-mindedly on his right shoulder.

"All of it was worth it. Those three years, the fight...I'd live it all again, if I had to, knowing what comes of it," he continued.

Astrid rolled on her side to face him, propping herself up on one elbow.

"You're still happy, then?" she asked.

He glanced over at her with a softness in his eyes and answered, "I'm happierâ€"with every month that goes by and I still have you."

Further conversation was suddenly unnecessaryâ€"words would no longer suffice. There was not a whole lot of forethought required for Astrid to find her way into his arms, pressing her lips to his. Four years later, give or take, and she was kissing him in the cove, again. She never could have predicted, with that first chaste peck on the cheek, that they would ever come so far. Back then, it was unfathomable to consider they would be lovers, in spite of the butterflies fluttering around in the pit of her stomach during their first romantic flight. The fact that his kiss could make her weak in the knees, or that she had, on more than one occasion, begged for his touch would never have occurred to her younger self. Hiccup was far too unassuming for anyone to suspect he was such an incredible lover, but Astrid was glad it had not taken her a year to figure out the truth. There was a lot that one could quickly grow tired of over the course of a year, and she wondered what it was about sex that made it the exception. Twelve months had not diminished her need for Hiccupâ€"they had only intensified it. She was addicted to him, in all honesty. Addicted to his body and the pleasure he gave her. Addicted to the sounds she could elicit from him, and the look of deep satisfaction on his face as they lie wrapped up and basking in the afterglow of it all. It was all fueled by love, of courseâ€"the fire that fed their unrelenting need for each other, burning brighter after one year than it ever had before.

Astrid was not entirely sure when she ended up on her back, stripped of her boots, pauldrons, and her skirt's spiky leather overlay, but that was less important than her tunic being bunched up under her arms, and the skilled way Hiccup was removing her breast bindingâ€"he had become quite adept at it, but that was hardly surprising. She moaned softly and arched her back at the first touch of his lips on her skin, and her hands sought any part of him she could reach. It

was all familiar, but no less exciting. It did not matter how many times he lavished her breasts with the same reverence and desire. It never felt dull or routine to be caught up in the slow and steady burn of his passion for her. So different from her own preferred hurried pace, Hiccup's very deliberate tongue offered the same delicious torment as it did the very first night she spent in his bed, almost one year ago. In many ways, the months felt like they gone by so quickly, but at the same time, she felt as though the two of them had been lovers for much longer. Four years, she thought to herself "to think of the time they had lost...

More clothes were shed "both hers and his" until only a few fabric barriers separated them. There was very little daylight left as they welcomed the twilight, holding each other tightly as their lips collided and their tongues brushed. Hiccup was content to keep kissing a while longer, caressing her breasts with a tenderness that was strangely sensual in the way each subtle movement of his hand and fingertips was calculated and purposeful. Astrid, however, was less patient and she deftly undid his pants without delay. He made no protest as she slid her hand inside, stroking him at the pace she had long since memorized "it had become automatic. Suddenly, he was much more motivated to move things along, bringing his hand up under her skirt "the one last article of clothing she kept on. In one year, they had both learned just about every inch of each other, and all of the ways to touch and caress for desired effects. She moaned softly, pressing her face into his shoulder and breathing in the comforting scent of his bare skin. She could not help the involuntary movement of her hips in time with his fingers anymore than he could help the wonderful noises her hand drew from him. She inched closer, wanting to lose herself in the sensation of his touch and the warmth his body provided. It was a peculiar thing to still feel such a powerful want and need for something she could so readily have "with all the nights they had spent together, and every private moment they had stolen around Berk, they had never denied one another. Astrid did not know if they could, or what would happen if they did. Perhaps all of Midgard would implode, or something as equally catastrophic? It was best never to find out, she decided.

"Hiccup..." she whispered, brushing her lips along his neck.

She felt him shudder ever so faintly, and then she bit him. Hard. It would leave a mark, and they both knew it, but they knew no one would ask "only assume, as they always did, leaving their intimacy within the realm of pure speculation. At that moment, it really did not matter anyway, because the throaty moan that escaped him was worth any awkwardness later. Astrid would have never thought Hiccup would be so receptive to a little bit of pain "he could make such a fuss when she punched him "but in the right context, he had confessed that he liked it. She still remembered fondly the surprise on his own face at the realization that he did, in fact, enjoy her love-bites.

Astrid withdrew her hand from his pants, but left him no time to feel disappointed about it. She was going to briefly lament the loss of his fingers, but she needed a deeper sense of fulfillment that touching alone could not satisfy. With little resistance, she rolled them both over until Hiccup was on his back, gazing up at her in amusement.

"So, that's how it's going to be?" he asked.

She grinned down at him and replied, "Are you complaining?"

"No."

She bent over to kiss him deeply and he propped himself up on his elbows to make it easier for her.

"Can you promise me something?" Astrid asked softly, when they took a breath.

"Anything. Name it," he answered, and she knew he would give her the moon and the stars if it was in his power to do so.

"Promise me we'll still be like this another year from now," she murmured, tracing his jaw with her fingertips. "I...I'll still need this," she admitted. "I'll still need you."

"I can't do that, Astrid. It would be lying," he replied. Just when she was about to snap back with an indignant retort, he added, "In a year, we'll only be better than this."

"Hiccup..."

He smiled up at her and laid back against the grass.

"It's simple if you think about it," he explained. "I love you more today than I did a year ago, and I loved you more a year ago than I did when you first kissed me in this cove—and I was pretty smitten then. So, it stands to reason, in another twelve months, I'll be even deeper in love with you. In fact, when I wake up tomorrow, I'll love you more than I do tonight, right now—and that's saying a lot."

Astrid was taken aback. Somehow, it still amazed her how easily he could say such romantic and sentimental things as if he was simply reciting some inconsequential fact about dragons. It still took her enough effort to admit that she needed him aloud, regardless if he already knew how she felt—and he almost always did. She often tried to reciprocate to the same degree, but even a year later, she usually settled for the comfort of brevity.

"I love you," she told him, idly trailing her hand down his chest.

"I love you, too," he replied. "Now...are we going to do this, or do I need to rein in my anticipation a bit?"

Astrid grinned and rolled her eyes before pulling his pants down far enough out of the way. She felt a rush of excitement, and what was once a bashful and insecure moment for first-time lovers—that initial exposure of oneself to another—did not cause even a moment's pause.

"I still like what I see," Astrid said, straddling his hips with a devious smirk on her face.

"Oh, thank you," he responded playfully. "A little ego inflation is good every now and then."

She laughed and he smiled, but the moment she lowered herself onto him, all further banter was cast aside. She tilted her head back and moaned his name, rolling her hips experimentally, to take him in as deep as he could possibly go. It was amazing. There was nothing else that compared to the feeling, and knowing that it was Hiccup.

"Yes..." he sighed. "Take whatever you need from me, Astrid."

She moved, immediately seeking the angles she knew felt best, bucking her hips with lustful abandon. Hiccup watched her as his hands roamed over her body, making her skin tingle in their wake. She wished she could see herself through his eyes, just once. The intensity in his gaze had not diminished with time, and she only hoped she could live up to whoever he saw when he looked at her.

"It's so good...Hiccup, I..." she moanedâ€"coherent thought was becoming more difficult.

"Me too," he said, placing his hands on her hips to guide them into a mutually beneficial rhythm. "Keep going. Just like that."

His words encouraged her, and she only wanted him to feel the same amount of pleasure he gave. It did not matter how long they made loveâ€"though the moon had been up for a timeâ€"as long as they both found satisfaction. Looking back, Astrid could see how they had only improved over several months. The first time they were together, she had also been on top, but it had not done as much for Hiccup thenâ€"not that he had not thoroughly enjoyed himself, anyway. As she rode him nearly a year later, however, in the peaceful isolation of the cove, she knew her lover well enough to know that he was as close as she was. They were both slipping away, teetering out at the edge of reality and self-control. There was no other circumstance she could think of where they welcomed such a complete breakdown.

"Hiccup!" Astrid yelped, and she was the first to lose it, consumed by an immeasurable pleasure that unhinged her from the rest of the world.

He followed almost immediately after her. So close, in fact, that they more or less came undone together, gladly drifting off amongst the waves of ecstasy and perfection they had made. No one else could join them thereâ€"no one else was welcome. What their love had created over the past year, or however long it was, belonged to them, alone. Even if, by some strange twist of fate, they did not last, Astrid could never return to the same placeâ€"to the same edge of infinityâ€"without Hiccup. With anyone else she could only land somewhere else much less satisfying. Before Hiccup, she sometimes wondered if there was a greater happiness than what she could obtain on her own. That had been the lingering question, and he was the indisputable answer.

She curled up on top of him as she came down from her high, and he wrapped his arms around her as they breathed in tandem. She felt oddly safer in his embrace, considering there were two dragons to keep watch over them.

"So, you know...happy anniversary or whatever," she muttered.

Hiccup smiled and asked, "One year or four?"

"Does it matter?"

"For us, no. It doesn't."

Astrid raised her head and they shared a brief, but loving kiss.

Sex was often spoken about as something naughty, humorous, scandalous, or perverse, depending on who was asked, but Astrid could not think of any other way to describe what she and Hiccup did as anything short of beautiful—the moonlight on their skin, the way they moved together, the sweet sounds they made...It was so regrettable that something so deeply rooted in love could be considered so wrong. It was their bodies, their lives, their business. Once they had started, they could not stop it. A year, four years, a lifetime—what difference did it make? Anniversaries, dating, marriage—all of those social constructs that really meant nothing when one considered that the gods, in all of their wisdom, had made two souls that were so inevitable that only _Ragnarok_ could separate them. What were dates and time to something so eternal? Still, she supposed it helped for marking milestones and tracking personal growth and progress. Twelve months together had certainly impacted them both.

"We should get back before your parents worry," Hiccup said, stroking her hair.

Astrid frowned but she also heard the reluctance in his voice. He was not keen to hurry back to pretending to be proper, either. He was better at it, but he hated it just as much as she did.

She sat up and moved off of him, reaching for her discarded clothes as he fixed his pants.

"I think we should sleep here," she said, pulling on her underwear and leggings. "The weather's nice and my parents won't worry—we have Toothless and Stormfly."

The dragons perked up at the mention of their names, as if to say 'Oh, so you remembered we're here?'

"I suppose we can always say we were out all night, riding our dragons," Hiccup suggested, pulling on his tunic.

"Well, I've certainly been riding _something_," Astrid muttered.

He laughed and she smiled, deciding that was how she would mark the years. Not by dates alone, but by the growth of the love they shared. After all, it was a far more significant quantity to measure than the number of days marked off on a calendar.

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****Author's Note:**** Smluffiness for some good ol' anniversary prompt, courtesy of Richi-chan. Classy, my friend.

No real plot, here. Just feels.

I kept thinking about it, and it just did not seem like Hiccup or Astrid to make a big deal about an anniversary in the traditional ways one might think, with gifts and much ado about the whole thing. Low-key seemed more "them". Hopefully, it is satisfying enough for this prompt.

*_Ragnarok-_ The Old Norse version of Armageddon, the apocalypse, the End Times...whatever you want to call it.

8. Properly Improper

****Author's Note:** **There's noting explicitly M-rated in this chapterâ€"more just discussed in passing and quick, er...glimpses? So, maybe we're like...T+, here.

Takes place shortly before HTTYD2. Hiccup and Astrid are 20.

****Disclaimer:** **I don't own the HTTYD franchise or any of the characters therein.

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"Do you think anyone noticed?" Astrid asked as she deftly undid Hiccup pantsâ€"there was a sense of urgency to her movements.

"Only Fishlegs and Ida, as far as I know, and they're not about to say anything," Hiccup replied, quickly working Astrid's leggings and underwear down her thighs before casting them aside with her boots.

She laughed softly, then grabbed him by the tunic as he straightened up, pulling him in for a heated kiss. He braced his hands against the wall on either side of her waist, catching himself before he completely lost his balance as he surrendered to her lips.

There was no real definitive moment when the line had been drawn, and no one knew who, exactly, had drawn it. Still, every soul on Berk was aware of the boundaries for proper displays of affection from a very young ageâ€"drilled into them amid the rather austere or indifferent manner in which others publically spoke about love and sex. It was something forbidden outside talk of marriageâ€"flings and youthful indiscretion could only lead to babies and the utter implosion of one's freedom and reputation, or so it had been repeatedly advised to Berk's adolescent population, lest they run off and fornicate with reckless abandon. Such an approach to the facts of life and maturity left many more questions than it did answers, however, and warnings of arranged marriages and unwanted pregnancies did very little to diminish the pubescent curiosity that struck every young Viking at some point in their teenage years. The boundaries were established. Proper behavior was expectedâ€"and nearly every teenager Hiccup knew, including himself, took it upon themselves to disregard the rules, anyway. Dragons only made it easier to escape the prying eyes of suspicious and nosy adults, though Hiccup suspected just as many secret trysts occurred in all the generations before the war had ended. It was naÃ¬ve to assume otherwise, and therein lied the hypocrisyâ€"the age-old adage of "do as we say, not as we do" that well-meaning adults loved to beat the village's youth over the head with until it had long since lost its potency.

"Hiccup, mmmn," Astrid sighed as he first buried himself inside of her.

She hooked a leg around him as she leaned back against the cold, stone wall. With one hand beneath her thigh and one hand on her waist, he held her steady against him.

No, the rules were routinely broken and the boundaries tested. The only care that was taken to mind propriety was not to get caught in the act, for rumors would always fly and gossip was never sparse, but without indisputable evidence, a young couple could still feign innocence and virtue. That was the goal, though getting caught was often inevitable, but it hardly counted when friends and other desperate lovers were the ones to stumble in on a bit of love-making in progress. There was a code—"you don't expose us, and we won't expose you." Everybody won, and the public was none the wiser. Relationships and friendships could both be made and destroyed by the code. Thankfully, for Hiccup and Astrid, their friends were trustworthy enough in that regard, even if for no other reason than to protect their own secrets. While Ruffnut did not care about her loose reputation and the damage it did to her marriage prospects, she did care if anyone learned of her lack of judgment with Snotlout on Bragaoss, so no one in their circle of friends said a word about it within earshot of others. Hiccup and Astrid, however, did not want to damage the bond between their clans, and as the future Chief of Berk, Hiccup's behavior was closely scrutinized—more so than any other young man on the island. The backlash for both him and Astrid would be far more severe, and so their friends said nothing that would be overheard, saving all their jests and snide remarks for when their group was alone.

Still, everyone knew Hiccup and Astrid were together. That much was obvious as they took full advantage of whatever displays of affection public opinion deemed acceptable—"kiss on the cheek, a quick peck on the lips, a brief embrace, and the occasional hand holding. It was all they could do to satisfy their mutual need for each other until they could find the time and the place to be completely alone. They did not care if they were met with the rolling of eyes or a noise of disgust—"predictable reactions to their proper and predictable behavior. It was frustrating to intentionally act reserved and reduce the majority of their time together to chase gestures, which ultimately gave way to often desperate and rushed passions later on. It could not be helped if they did not want to get caught—and more for Astrid's reputation, Hiccup did not. They would both face repercussions, but he would receive a little more forgiveness for no other reason than he was a man, and apparently, his urges were different—"more intense.

"Harder," Astrid whispered against his lips.

He complied, moving his hand from her waist to the wall for support as he increased his efforts. He was painfully aware of each second that passed by—"another moment for their absence to be discovered—"but he did not want to rush. Private moments with Astrid were not the easiest to come by around Berk.

She leaned forward, burying her face in his neck to help muffle her sounds—"a pity, but a necessary one.

"_So_ _good_," she mumbled against his skin, and he grinned.

Clearly, those who would pass judgment on them did not know Astrid well. The notion that her desire paled in comparison to his, in _any_ way, was laughable. In fact, when Hiccup thought about it, Astrid really was the initiator—or, at least, she had been.

He had always been interested in her, from a very young age—from whatever age it was that a boy could first look at a girl and find her pretty. Then, he wanted her—from whatever age it had been when a young man could first look at a young woman and be attracted to her with far less innocent intentions. But Astrid had made the first move, and most of the moves for a while after. She threw her arms around him when it was least expected, and kissed him at the most random intervals—not that he could complain. Her returned interest in him was all he had ever wanted, but he felt limited by the rather platonic nature of their relationship the rest of the time they were together. Constrained by what was considered proper for their age, and the ambiguity of Astrid's true feelings for him, he never dared to do more than offer warm words and friendly encouragement, inwardly reveling in astonished pleasure whenever she pressed her lips to his. That had been alright, then. That had been safe. That had been entirely acceptable for others to witness. Onlookers had even whooped and wolf-whistled at times, all in the spirit of teasing and good fun. There was no shame in it—no sense of guilt or impropriety—but then they had turned eighteen, and all sweet and chaste youthful sentiments burnt up in the flames love, lust, and sexual maturity.

They pressed their foreheads together, panting softly as they came down from their dizzying high. They clung tightly to one another, sharing small kisses and a few sweet nothings as they took just a few short moments to bask in the afterglow of it all.

"I love you," he said.

Astrid smiled at him.

"I love you, too."

Hiccup could not, realistically, return to a relationship based solely on innocent touches and friendly embraces—not when he had come to intimately know Astrid's body and the sound of his name on her lips before it was lost within a wanton moan. There was no coming back from that—no amount of virtuous acting that could satisfy the need they had created for themselves. But they tried. Day after day, with more success than most young lovers, but the strain of keeping the true nature of their relationship secret only made the desire and pent-up frustration worse. That was how they found themselves hiding out in the dusty old archives while the rest of the village was enjoying supper in the Great Hall among all the food, ale, and inebriated frivolity.

It was far from the most romantic of settings, and Astrid sneezed as she reached for her discarded leggings, only seeming to send more coils of dust into the air. Hiccup laughed as he fixed his pants.

"I hate you," she retorted playfully, gently flinging one of her boots in his general direction.

"Somehow, I doubt that," he replied.

Berk was celebrating the summer festival of Lithasblot, giving thanks the goddess Urda for yet another season's abundant harvest, and as the future Chief, Hiccup was expected to be there, under the watchful eye of his father. It was not that Hiccup was trying to avoid the festival completelyâ€”on the contrary. He enjoyed most holidays and festivals their people celebrated, but it was near impossible to keep his mind on the role he had to play when Astrid had been making her "come hither" eyes at him all afternoon. She would tell him later it was his faultâ€”though how she reasoned that was beyond him. He had done little else but act as a sort of "junior Chief" around the village, but he was beginning to suspect that was a bit of a turn-on for Astrid. Still, he managed to keep his desire contained for longer than he expected, restricting their interactions to brief hugs and quick kisses that most everyone noticed, but were perfectly acceptable. They talked and they laughed, enjoying the emotional intimacy that could be found in the relatively private corners of Berk. Astrid smiled fondly at himâ€”a look that he lived forâ€”and tugged at his braids affectionately as they spoke. It was innocent, and it was fulfilling to the extent which they could be fulfilled, in that time and place. Then evening had fallen, and they had sat down at the usual table with their friends in the Great Hall, participating in the same playful banter they had come to expect with the other dragon ridersâ€”save for Fishlegs, whom they had not seen for an hour or so. It was all routine, and properâ€”then Astrid had placed her hand on his knee, which then traveled upward, hidden from sight beneath the tabletop. It was the enticing little stroke of her fingers and squeeze to his inner thigh that finally broke himâ€”a gesture he could have otherwise ignored if he had not been playing the prude all day.

They excused themselves under the pretense of getting more ale, but once they were far enough from the other dragon riders, they made a beeline right for the double doors. Hiccup's first thought was the forge. It was close enough to the Great Hall that they could make it there and back without wasting too much time. Not to mention, Gobber was preoccupied with drinking himself into a stupor, and there would be no one to intrude on them. That plan was quickly scrapped though, as the two of them came to abrupt stop just short of the double doors. At the last table sat Astrid's parents engaged in jovial conversation with Stoick. There would be no escaping the Great Hall without arousing suspicion and fabricating a sufficient lie.

Hiccup scanned the Great Hall for some alternativeâ€”a place they could steal a moment alone, unnoticed by the wayward gaze.

"This way," he murmured to Astrid, taking her by the hand.

They slipped back into the crowd, weaving between distracted Vikings. They made their way to the far corner of the Great Hall where the barrels of wine and ale were kept, stacked in front of the mostly forgotten archives, where few Hooligans cared to venture. With once last quick glance behind them, to ensure they were not seen, they ducked behind the barrels, expecting to finally be alone. They both let out a startled gasp to find that quite the opposite was true.

"W-Who's that?" came a startled squeakâ€”decidedly female.

"Hiccup?" Fishlegs gasped, quickly straightening out his clothes.

There was a rather buxom redhead with him, also fixing her dress as fast as she could, blushing furiously in her embarrassment.

"_Fishlegs_!" Astrid exclaimed in disbelief. "I thought you were interested in Ruffnut?"

"I-I am! I justâ€"she's so difficult to read and...well, Ida and I got to talking and..."

"Drinking?" Astrid suggested, under her breath.

"I'm sorry! I'm just going toâ€"!" Ida stammered, inching away from Fishlegs.

"No, no, no! Don't mind us," Hiccup interjected, steering Astrid past the other two lovers. "We were just passing by!"

"What are you twoâ€"?" Fishlegs inquired, but Hiccup interrupted again.

"If anyone asks, you never saw us, and we never saw you!"

They retreated into the archives, snickering as they shut the door behind them.

"I think we just cock-blocked Fishlegs," Hiccup said, trying to stifle his laughter and drudge up pity for their friend.

"His fault for failing to use a perfectly good door," Astrid replied, wasting no time in pulling him up against herâ€"time was not on their side.

It was such a relief to drop the actâ€"much like shedding heavy and cumbersome armor. Even though it was fastâ€"by their standards, anywayâ€"they were both left satisfied. It was not that sex was the foundation of their relationship, but two souls could not be as compatible, and as mutually attracted to one another, without being drawn together brilliant bursts of passionâ€"a physical outlet for the deeper feelings they held for one another. It was like being caught adrift in an emotional current of love and adoration, but their heads were held under the surface by the village's expectations, forcing them conform to an established code of propriety which was drowning them. Alone and uninhibited, they could finally resurface and _breathe._

"We should probably head back out there separately," Hiccup said, as Astrid pulled on her undergarments and leggings.

"Rightâ€"because emerging separately from the archives, a few minutes apart, is far less suspicious than emerging together?" she replied skeptically.

He shrugged and responded, "If you have a better idea, thenâ€" "

"Oi! What are ye two doin' back here?" came a loud and indignant

voice, penetrating through the door quite clearly.

Hiccup and Astrid both froze in horror as Gobber interrogated another couple outside the archives.

"I-I wasâ€"we were...nothing! We weren't doing anything, Gobber!" came Fishlegs' rather startled and unconvincing voice.

"It sure doesn't look like nothin'!" the older Viking said. "If ye had a shred of common sense, ye'd bump uglies behind closed doors like any half-intelligent person! Now fix yer pants and the two of ye get lost before I'm obligated te tell the young lady's parents."

It was an idle threat, of courseâ€"Hiccup knew that better than most. Gobber was not one to go sharing others' secrets around Berk. He harbored a deep disdain for gossip, and cared very little about what anyone else considered proper behavior, but the deep-seated fear of exposure was enough to have Fishlegs and Ida scampering off as fast as they could make themselves presentable, it seemed.

Astrid frantically crammed on her boots as Gobber's wooden leg clunked along the ground, closer to the door. Of all the Hooligans that could catch them in the act, Gobber was probably the best choiceâ€"largely indifferent and forgiving of others' indiscretions. In fact, the older man probably already knew enough about their relationship, as did Stoick, but they were always so careful that the older men turned a blind eye to the lack of excuses over Astrid's nightly visits to the Haddock household. No one had ever caught themâ€"ever seen them. Beyond rumors and suspicions, no one could prove the nature of their relationship with absolute certaintyâ€"besides their friends to whom they had confessed. It made denial easy and left the older men, and Astrid's parents, blissfully ignorant beyond their own assumptions.

The door creaked in warning as Gobber pushed it open, and Astrid hopped forward while she pulled on her boots completely. She seized Hiccup by the tunic and backed him against the wall, crushing their lips together as Gobber stepped inside the dusty room. To the older man, it must have looked as though Astrid had simply forced another kiss on Hiccup, as she had done countless times before. He was willing to wager he even played his part well, genuinely startled by the suddenness of it.

"Well, at least the two of ye still have some sense," Gobber said, waving his hand dismissivelyâ€"their kissing was nothing new, offensive, or unexpected to the older man.

Astrid pulled away from Hiccup sharply, looking as though she had just realized the older man had walked in on them.

"Hiccup, the Chief is lookin' fer ye. I'll, eh...tell him ye're on yer way," Gobber said, casting them a doubtful glance before hobbling out of the room.

He shut the door behind him and Hiccup and Astrid remained still for a couple of seconds longer, making sure the dull sound of his peg leg against the ground had completely faded among the noise and merriment of the Great Hall. Then, they burst out laughing, leaning into one another as they were overcome by it.

"Oh gods! That was close!" Astrid exclaimed. "I only just got my leggings on! I don't think I've ever gotten dressed so fast!"

Hiccup chuckled and cupped her face in his hands.

"That was brilliant!" he said.

"I just showed him what he wanted to seeâ€"what they all want to see. What better cover than to be doing exactly what's expected of us?" she replied with a shrug.

Hiccup shook his head, grinning. He then leaned in and kissed Astrid deeply, appreciative of her cleverness. It was not nearly as frightening an idea to be discovered then, for though it was a rather passionate kiss they shared, there was a simple truth both he and Fishlegs could attest toâ€"of all the possible amorous exchanges, it was far better a thing to be caught kissing.

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling the prompt "Caught kissin'" by British1994. At first I was a bit perplexed about how to do this one, considering Hiccup and Astrid have kissed before. Then the one shot kind of started to write itself, and this is where I ended up. I hope it works for you, British1994! I can't help but feel I so often end up far from what y'all hoped for when you make requests. Oops.

Also, I would like to say that, come New Year's, I'm closing my requests for a while. I don't know for how long, but I am taking a prolonged hiatus from writing, starting in April. I need to put out a cut-off date for taking requests so y'all don't keep requesting while I've returned to the proverbial rock from whence I crawled. I intend to return eventually, but I can't begin to tell y'all when that'll be. That's not to say that, during my hiatus, I will have disappeared completely. I'll still be on this site to PM, review fics I read, and maybe throw out a quick drabble once every few months or so. I'm just taking a break from expanding on this collection of work I've created so far. Soon, I just won't have the necessary time to dedicate to it, as much as that saddens me. :(

9. No One That Matters

****Author's Note: ****Much like my one-shot "Memories" in the collection One Year And A Dozen Words, this one-shot will jump around in time to create a more comprehensive picture, but I will try to give a pretty clear indication of how old the characters are at the time of each memory. At the start and end of the one-shot, though, all of the dragon riders are 20 and it takes place between This Maddening EndrÃ³aga and HTTYD2. Does that make sense? I hope it does.

****Disclaimer: ****I don't own the HTTYD franchise and I take some creative liberties with the official content of the series, all for my entertainment, and the entertainment of my readers. I make no money from these fics. K, thanks!

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The chill in the morning and evening air hinted at summer's rapid

retreat, but the days on Berk still held enough warmth that they were mostly enjoyable. After the events on Bragaoss, the young dragon riders had grown closer than they previously had been, reminiscent of the times before adulthood drove a wedge of disinterest and misunderstandings between them all. Astrid and Ruffnut were good friends again, swapping the secrets of womanhood that Hiccup was confident he did not want, nor need, to know. Tuffnut and Fishlegs made a concerted effort to spend more time around Hiccup and Astrid as well, and though it was his personal opinion that the two young men had been relatively stunted in personal growth over the past few years, it was still a nice change to be on more familiar terms with them once again, as opposed to the awkward, forced conversations of yesteryear.

The most drastic improvement in Hiccup's social life, however, had to be that of his relationship with his cousin. While sarcastic banter was still the norm between them, and the occasional disagreement brought them back to moments of mostly bygone animosity, there grew a friendship and honest sense of camaraderie that had been previously faked for the sake of circumstance and convenience—working side-by-side to promote dragon-Viking relations had called for reluctant cooperation on both their parts, over the years. Hiccup's abundant patience and genuine desire for reconciliation usually kept him calm and collected, even among his cousin's more abrasive moments, but since their return from Bragaoss, something in their relationship had changed. Whether it was a deeper understanding and appreciation for each other's innate differences, or mutual exhaustion at carrying the weight of a sordid family history that was not their fault, was arguable—and perhaps it was a bit of both? Perhaps, they had both simply matured past the point of bearing the burden of their clans' respective grievances with each other? Regardless of the reasons, Hiccup was thankful for it, and the improved feelings of kinship did not go unnoticed.

"I must say, I was surprised to find you and Snotlout having a good laugh together at supper last night," Astrid said, as she and Stormfly glided smoothly beside Hiccup and Toothless.

"Things have been better lately," Hiccup replied with a casual shrug of his shoulders.

"I know, but it's not a sight I'm accustomed to seeing," she responded. "You and Snotlout—enjoying _one_ another's company? I fear we've reached the End Times. _Ragnarök_ will soon be upon us!"

"Funny," he retorted with a dry sarcasm; Astrid laughed. "I admit, it's been a real relief to move past everything."

"Everything?"

Astrid shot him an inquisitive glance but it would not do her much good, and he supposed she knew that as well, deep down. From the occasional slip and insinuation, she had managed to piece together that there was far more to the nearly lifelong rivalry between Hiccup and Snotlout than either young man was willing to admit to. Hiccup's tight-lipped approach to the subject did not deter Astrid's attempts to pry, and on more than one occasion, she had brought up his promise to be more forthcoming to persuade some candor, but he had never

divulged anything meaningful. Astrid did not bother to hide her frustration with him whenever he held his silence.

"I don't know why you bother protecting himâ€"keeping his secrets," she had once told him, a couple years ago, folding her arms across her chest in disapproval. "You don't owe Snotlout a damn thing."

"There are some things, Astrid, that it's just not my place to share with you," was his reply, "no matter how I feel about him, personally."

She just scoffed and rolled her eyes, but he suspected she was more upset that he was keeping anyone else's secrets beside their own. It implied a level of trust and respect that he did not have with anyone else but Astrid, and he wished he could tell her that his loyalty to his cousin did not surpass his feelings for herâ€"but it would only perpetuate the complicated cycle of her insisting on his openness, which would ultimately make him seem contradictory when he immediately turned around and continued to safeguard the more troubling aspects of his past with Snotlout. If she only knew the truth, she would understandâ€"but sometimes, darker family affairs left festering sores on the heart that were better left untouched.

"You're never going to tell me anything, are you?" Astrid asked, punctuated with a heavy sigh.

Their dragons skimmed the shoreline, much to the delight of the young children playing there, holding fast to the fleeting joys of summer. They cheered and waved at Hiccup and Astrid as they sped past, in awe of two of the riders they idolized.

"Maybe somedayâ€"not now," Hiccup replied, rather vaguely.

The fact of the matter was the secrets he kept on Snotlout's behalf were inextricably intertwined with his own painful memoriesâ€"the ones he was not very keen on re-living. At least, not with anyone else. In an odd way, before he and Snotlout had reached their great understanding, they had been bound by the tainted ties of a grudge imposed on them since early childhood. Even at the height of their rivalry, there was a sizeable piece of a sensitive past they both shared. They might not have cared for one another then, but they could not deny their regrettable connection, either.

It had not always been that way, though. At least, not a first. It was unfortunate that the memory of the years before the hostility set in could not be clearly recalled, but who, at twenty, could vividly and accurately recall the events of years one through five of their young life? Those days, long gone from the forefront of his memories, had only left him with flashes of images and lingering feelings that he was not entirely sure were real. There were moments of a barely remembered friendshipâ€"playing together as young boys were apt to do, lost in their childish imaginings. Fantasies of becoming great dragon-slayers of Viking lore translated into games of chase, one of them playing the dragon while the other played the mighty warrior. They alternated their roles, laughter filling those daysâ€"or, at least, Hiccup thought it had. It was all an old, faded haze. Perhaps, if those happier memories had been the ones to really stick with him, he could have better coped with the later years of bitterness and

discord that sullied their familial bond. They would have had something positive to hang on to, reminding them that friendship was actually possible and was, once, the basis of their relationship.

Then, shortly after they both turned five, things began to change. Hiccup did not understand it then, as he was far too young to know of such things like sex and illegitimacy, and in hindsight, he seriously doubted Snotlout knew why he was being prompted to behave differently, either. That did not change the fact that his cousin, who was once a reliable childhood companion, suddenly seemed to dislike him. It was both hurtful and confusing when Snotlout first declared, "I don't want to play with you," taking great care to emphasize that it was the idea of playing with him, specifically, that his cousin found objectionable, and not the idea of simply playing itself. What Hiccup hoped was just a bizarre, passing mood continued whenever they were together, and when he had asked Snotlout for the cause of his hatred, his cousin nastily replied, "You were born." While he did not fully understand what Snotlout meant by that, and how his existence was particularly offensive, the words still stung. Seeking clarification from adults proved counterproductive, as well. His uncle preferred to ignore him, or dismiss him like a mild irritation he could not be bothered with, which only emboldened Snotlout in his mistreatment of him. Stoick was not much help, either, urging Hiccup to forget his burgeoning troubles with Snotlout with all of the evasiveness of an adult who was deliberately hiding the truth from his child. So, things inevitably unraveled from there, and Hiccup tried to move past it as the seasons dragged by, but Snotlout only grew meaner and more relentless in his torment.

Then, Hiccup was seven, and it was becoming painfully obvious that he was not quite like other Viking boys on Berk. Painful, because innocent childhood games had given way to rougher interactions, and he was often on the receiving end of a punch, kick, shove, or particularly uncomfortable practical joke. He was not built the same—other more lanky children were still taller. He did not think the same, speak the same, or pursue all of the same interests. It was around this age that his father brought to his attention how abnormal his behavior was, and there was mutual frustration by both father and son as Stoick pressured him to act differently—to be more like Snotlout, which was like rubbing a copious amount of salt into a very raw wound.

"But I'm not like him," Hiccup insisted, sulking at the table as he shared a rather tense meal with his father.

"Aye, I'm aware of that, son—and so is the rest of Berk. Yeh need te know how important it is that yeh start te exhibit more..._Viking-like_ qualities," Stoick replied.

"Maybe you should have had him as a son, instead," Hiccup mumbled.

His heart nearly leapt into his throat when his father slammed his colossal fist on the table, rattling his bowl.

"Yeh are my son! Yeh will be the next Chief of Berk, so help me Odin! I will not see that Jorgenson boy run this village into the ground!" Stoick thundered.

Hiccup stared at his father for a moment, wide-eyed in alarm.

"S-Snotlout's going to be Chief?" he asked, weakly.

"Not if I have anythin' te say about it," Stoick grumbled. "Yeh are a Haddock, and one way or another, Hiccup, yeh will live up te that legacy."

Neither one of them could have possibly known how prophetic those words would eventually prove to be, especially with the rivalry being firmly set between Hiccup and Snotlout. It was orchestrated more by their own fathers, which Hiccup had quickly realized, but Snotlout seemed oblivious or unconcerned that he was playing out some larger game born from a conflict that was before their time. For years, Hiccup did not understand the reason behind why the Jorgensons pushed for dominance in all things, and why his own father was so disappointed in his incapacity to adequately push back against his cousin's challenges. His heart was never in itâ€"not when he had an abysmal record of embarrassing himself and his clan, as many took great care to remind him.

At the age of ten, he had been fetching some fresh drinking water from the nearby well, and Snotlout had waited until he was precariously balancing the overflowing bucket in his arms before stealthily sneaking up behind him and kicking the legs out from underneath him. With a startled yelp, Hiccup fell to the ground as the bucket toppled from his arms, soaking his clothes and the ground beneath him, creating a puddle of mud where there previously had not been one. Snotlout's mocking laughter was joined by nearly identical cackling, and Hiccup glared up at his cousin and the two lanky blondes beside himâ€"Snotlout seemed to be collecting his own band of loyal followers, but for what purpose? To keep Hiccup from having any friends? His un-Vikingness was doing a good enough job of fostering loneliness without the extra effort from Snotlout.

"You look even more puny when wet!" Snotlout laughed.

"Like a drowned rat!" the male Thortson twin addedâ€"Ruffnut or Tuffnut. It was difficult to keep that straight.

Hiccup glared at his tormentors as he rose to his feet, his drenched tunic feeling heavy on his thin frame.

"I don't know how soaking my clothes makes you any better than I am," he said, picking up the bucket at his feet.

"Everything makes me better than you are," Snotlout retorted.

"Well, that clarifies it," Hiccup repliedâ€"he did not know when he had first started using sarcasm, but it seemed to be the easiest way to make fun of Snotlout with all the satisfaction that the joke was lost on the older boy.

"You're an embarrassment to this tribe!" Snotlout sneered.

"That's not exactly news," Hiccup said, flatly.

"My dad says I'm going to be the next Chief, since you're an insult

to everything it means to be a Viking!"

"Good. Maybe he can help you like he helps my dad"it doesn't sound like you can think for yourself."

Hiccup had quickly learned he was not a physical match for his cousin, so the only way he ever bested Snotlout was through his wit and intellect. Of course, this infuriated his cousin for no other reason than Hiccup was better than him at something"even if it was not a quality highly valued among Vikings. But, for all of his intelligence, he was always so easily bated into argument. It would have been smarter to just ignore Snotlout and the bumbling idiots that followed him, but the flames of their rivalry were fanned by their families, as well as their pride, and for all his lack of traditional Viking characteristics, Hiccup had inherited a stubbornness that sometimes superceded his own logic. When Snotlout could not longer contribute any worthy comebacks, fists usually ended the conflict in his favor. Hiccup should have seen it coming"should have anticipated how it would end"but it still caught him by surprise when Snotlout's fist collided with the side of his face. The Twins responded with a chorus of "Ooooooh!" as Hiccup staggered sideways, trying to clear the stars from his vision.

"You don't know anything about my dad!" Snotlout snapped, before storming off and leaving Hiccup standing there sore, soaked, and bewildered.

For all of his cousin's inherent boorishness, only the subject of Spitelout could get Snotlout genuinely rattled on a level that went beyond personal pride and family grudges. Hiccup did not understand it, much like he did not understand the whole point behind their squabbling in the first place, but he did not have much time to dwell on it. He was due in Gobber's smithy, and his new apprenticeship was just another move by his father to find some way to drudge up some value to his diminutive son while keeping him preoccupied and out of trouble"it was no secret Hiccup had a knack for attracting it.

He ran for home to change clothes, face burning when he nearly ran into Astrid, who looked him over with a disgusted stare of disapproval. She had become just another aspect of his rivalry with his cousin, and he suspected Snotlout wanted Astrid as his girlfriend more to keep her from Hiccup, than out of a genuine attraction to the girl. Half of his cousin's motivations were deliberate moves to make him miserable. Snotlout took just as much twisted satisfaction from seeing Hiccup fail as he did from his own honest successes, and Hiccup had long since grown accustomed to seeing all of the things he wanted most go to his cousin"praise, victory in the Thawfest games, the best new weapons hack silver could buy, acceptance by his father"but Astrid was the one thing he could not let go of. Losing her to Snotlout would burn him far worse than any else, and it was not like she was even his to lose. She could not stand him, as far as Hiccup could tell, but she seemed to loathe his cousin with equal contempt. If she ultimately chose Snotlout over him, considering she found them both unappealing, it would be the ultimate insult to his pride and shatter his heart. Snotlout knew that as well, and so he pursued Astrid relentlessly in hopes to sway her affection toward him.

Astrid narrowed her eyes at Hiccup impatiently as he blocked her path, hands on her hips.

"S-Sorry!" he blurted out, stepping aside to let her passâ€"she continued on without giving him an ounce more consideration.

He watched her walk away, momentarily distracted by the way her golden hair shimmered as it caught the rays afternoon sun, before mentally slapping himself. Astrid's beauty was mesmerising, but Gobber's wrath over his tardiness would be a far more powerful force to behold.

He had not been working in the smithy for very long, but in the few weeks that he had been studying in Gobber's towering shadow, he had come to realize that the less he made his presence known, the more tolerable the hours wereâ€"for the both of them. So, when he arrived at the shop on time and out of breath, but significantly drier, he only gave his mentor a small nod before hastily tying on his oversized leather apron. He then faded into the background to observeâ€"Gobber was not about to let him start touching anything yet. The older man did not even speak to him much during their time together, further emphasizing his displeasure at being assigned an apprenticeâ€"especially the village embarrassment. Hiccup was expected to silently watch him work, learning through visual study, and through trial and error, as Gobber barked out orders for tools he had never heard of before. After a few quick slaps upside his head, Hiccup had learned the names of the tools rather quickly.

"Work the bellows," Gobber demanded after a couple hours of silent treatment. "Yeh'll probably have te throw all yer weight into itâ€"not that ye have much te spare."

Hiccup did as he was told, not very keen to get on the older Viking's bad side. He had heard tales of Gobber's ferocity on the battlefieldâ€"the man had not lost his limbs by being cowardly. He had slayed the most dangerous of dragons right alongside Hiccup's father, and the cantankerous weaponsmith had a reputation for being unreasonable, so Hiccup worked diligently in his presence.

It did, indeed, require most of his strength to work the large bellows that breathed life into the forge, but he compressed them with everything he had as Gobber continued to pound away at the anvil, back turned to his apprentice.

"Yeh're foolin' yerself, Stoick!" came a gruff voice from outside the shop.

Hiccup glanced over his shoulder to see his father and his uncle walking towards the Great Hall. The two of them were alone, which was unusual, given that they never seemed to friendly apart from duties to the village that united them.

"I know yer personal feelin's on the subject, Spitelout, but there's no denyin' the order of succession," Stoick insistedâ€"Hiccup recognized the mounting irritation in his father's voice, having often being on the receiving end of it.

"The entire village is in agreementâ€" "

"An overstatment!" Stoick interrupted, waving his hand dismissively.

Spitelout reached out and caught him the shoulder, and Hiccup feared for a moment that his father might strike his uncle.

"Yeh can't mean te tell me yeh think yer son would make a better Chief than Snotlout. The boy could never protect this village, much less himself! There's no shame in admittin' it, Stoickâ€"there can be a runt even amongst the strongest of bloodlines," Spitelout said with an air of smugness.

"Yeh don't think I know what this is really about?" Stoick replied in a low, warning tone. "Yeh don't doubt my son as much as yeh would love nothin' more than te elevate yersâ€"yer entire familyâ€"over mine. This is about yer prideâ€"yer angerâ€"over what our father did."

Spitelout seemed to become instantly furious.

"That man was no fatherâ€"not te me. Yeh can pretend otherwise, Stoick, but when he fucked my mother, a bastard was not supposed te be part of the deal. I was nothin' more than a complication te himâ€"a mistake!"

"Yeh have my sympathies," Stoick replied, flatlyâ€"so, sarcasm was an inheritable trait, after all.

"That is the problem with the whole lot of yehâ€"yer entire clan! I have Chief's blood in me too, brother, and still yeh think yeh're better than I amâ€"that yer blunder of a son is better than mine! That yeh deserve te be Chief just because our mothers were differentâ€"because yers wasn't branded a whore!"

"My son will be the next Chief, Spitelout! All of yer posturin' cannot change that!" Stoick growled.

"We'll see, brother. My boy will beat yers down until there is not an ounce of credibility left in himâ€"rightful hier, or not. The Jorgensons will get their overdue recognition, and I would love te see the riots that break out on the day yeh try te promote Hiccup over my son."

Spitelout turned his back to Stoick and continued towards the Great Hall. Hiccup could not recall ever witnessing such an unapologetic display of open disrespect towards the village Chief, and he suspected the only reason his father did not lash out and beat his uncle was the blood ties they shared.

He eased up on the bellows as he became lost in thought, processing all he had just overheard. He had wondered why his uncle had a different surname, but he had always assumed it was because Snotlout's mother was his father's sister and, for whatever reason, his father did not like to mention her. With the strife between their two clans, it was likely that brother and sister had become estrangedâ€"but that was far from the truth, apparently, and suddenly more pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

His uncle was the illegitimate son of the former Chiefâ€"at ten years old, Hiccup was not entirely ignorant of what that meant. His grandfather had bedded Spitelout's mother and produced an unintended child who had been raised in the shadow of his legitimate sibling, always reminded that he was inadequate and unwanted. Suddenly, the

bitterness that lingered in the air between their families made sense to Hiccup, and he knew then why his uncle bore such hatred for himâ€”such disdain for the Haddock clan and the natural order of things. He knew, then, why his uncle strove to better himself, and his son, over the Haddocksâ€”it was pride. Pride and reputation. Not just for the glory and honor of it, but for the validationâ€”a final confirmation from the village that the Jorgensons actually mattered, and were more than the product of a lecherous old man's illicit wanderings. Envy and resentment were at the basis of Hiccup's relationship with his cousin, and he was not sure how much of the truth Snotlout knew, but he suspected the other boy knew enough. He suspected Spitelout had given Snotlout the bits of information he needed to feel cheatedâ€”to feel motivated to prove himself over Hiccup as a more worthy Viking, and a more worthy heir to Berk.

Hiccup nearly jumped out of his skin when Gobber cleared his throat directly behind him, and he whipped around to utter some poorly constructed apology for growing absentminded at the bellows. Gobber, however, did not seem upset with him. Instead, he was looking at Hiccup with a peculiar expression that could only be described as pityâ€”a stark contrast to the perpetual look of annoyance he always wore whenever they worked together.

"Go home, lad. There's nothin' more fer me te teach ye this evenin'," Gobber instructed with an uncharacteristic air of compassion about him.

Hiccup did not need to be told twice. He threw off his leather smithy's apron and hurried home, his mind fit to burst. On the one hand, he felt sorry for his uncle and the rest of the Jorgenson clan. To carry such a stain on the family name had to be shameful, but he resented the idea that he and his cousin had been made into pawns to play out the Jorgenson-Haddock grudge match. What fault of it was theirs? They were only children, but apparently that was not enough of a deterrent to the animosity. It was not enough of a reason to forgive and forgetâ€”and his father was just as guilty of stoking the fires of rivalry as Spitelout was.

Lying down on his bed, Hiccup gazed up at the shadows playing on the ceiling as the last bands of sunlight relinquished their hold on the day. He felt a wide spectrum of emotions, but after the initial shock faded, a great amount of anger and hurt settled in. If his uncle could be believed, it was popular opinion that he was not fit to be the next Chief of Berk. It was painful, not because he necessarily wanted the title, but because his entire tribe found him to be unworthy to follow his father. It only reinforced what an outsider he wasâ€”how much he lacked within the context of Viking culture. He had been trying to cope with his "uniqueness" for the past few yearsâ€”ever since it had been brought to his attention just how improper he was in almost all thingsâ€”but to know that he was truly alone, and that no one really believed in him, plunged him completely into the reality of his social isolation. The only person on his side seemed to be his father, and that was because it was a matter of pride and principle. He could not really consider his father an ally when his shortcomings were met with harsh words and disappointed scowling.

Two years only worsened matters.

At twelve, the other kids were assigned jobs that threw them into the heat of battle whenever the dragons raided the village. It was a great honor, even if it consisted of just throwing buckets of water on the flames. Hiccup, meanwhile, was stuck in the smithy, of no particular use to anyoneâ€”as Gobber took great care to frequently remind him. Snotlout just seemed to enjoy more popularity and admirationâ€”his brutish, bullying nature earning him more respect, particularly if directed at Hiccup, whom nearly everyone considered a nuisance. There was a jealousy in his heart that Hiccup was ashamed to admit to, but it was a difficult emotion to snuff out when he had to watch his cousin repeatedly taking pleasure in all the things that should have been his, had the gods not been so cruel. How much easier life would be if the roles were switchedâ€”if he were a Jorgenson and Snotlout, a Haddock. The order of succession, and clan superiority, would not be so terribly out of balance.

Hiccup had resigned himself to the fact that he was not the heir his father needed him to be, and despite his father's best efforts to push him into it, he never really would become that person. It seemed like Spitelout would get his wish, and Snotlout would ascend to chiefdom, thereby righting any perceived history of wrongs. That did not bother Hiccup as much as his cousin's continued need to knock him down, degrading and humiliating him for his own amusement. Snotlout had won. Why could the other boy not see that?

A hard and deliberate punch to the back of his shoulder jolted him out of his thoughts.

"What is your problem?" Hiccup asked irritably, turning to glare at his cousin.

"You," Snotlout retorted with a smirk.

"You could have killed me!" Hiccup exclaimed, nodding towards the long, steep set of stairs directly below himâ€”the same ones leading to and from the Great Hall.

"Oh, well that would have solved everyone's problems, wouldn't it?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes and started down the stairs, intentionally keeping a faster pace than Snotlout, determined to keep sufficient space between them. It was not above his cousin to push him down and see how far he would fall.

"Tell me, Hiccup, how does it feel to know you're going to get absolutely clobbered in the Thawfest games tomorrow?" Snotlout asked, grinning wickedly.

"Probably the same way it feels every year," Hiccup replied flatly.

"Well, I guess it really isn't new for you, is it? I mean, everybody knows you've already lost the chiefdom to me."

"Yeah, but it doesn't make your family any more legitimate."

For once, he anticipated the attack, finally knowing what triggered his cousin's temper. He ducked, and Snotlout lost his footing as the swing of his arm failed to connect with Hiccup's face. They were

close enough to the bottom of the steps that it was nothing more than a short stumble, but Snotlout fell into the dirt, limbs sprawled out in all directions. Laughter met their ears, and Hiccup glanced up to see the Thortson twins giggling gleefully as they pointed at his cousinâ€"apparently, their loyalty only extended so far.

Snotlout sat up at once, face tinged red with embarrassment.

Unable to resist, Hiccup teased, "Careful! There's a step there!"

The Twins overheard him and laughed harder, willing to cackle at anyone's expense, it seemed, but they quickly grew bored and left.

"Snotlout!" someone shouted from behind them.

Hiccup turned to see Spitelout stomping down the stone steps towards them. There was a fury on his face that was extremely unsettlingâ€"moreso than the usual unease that immediately preceded a scolding.

"Uncle, Iâ€" Hiccup began, but Spitelout did not seem the least bit interested in him.

The bitter man strode past him, knocking him aside, and he caught himself before he fell back and hit his head on the cold, hard stone.

"Dad, it was an accident," Snotlout said, with a tremor in his voice that caught Hiccup by surprise.

"Get up. Yer a Jorgenson, fer Thor's sake!" Spitelout snapped, and his voice sounded oddâ€"in the same way Gobber and Stoick's did when they had too much ale with supper.

"Dad, he didn't push me or anything. I just slipped andâ€"

Snotlout's feeble and fearful attempt to explain himself was cut off as Spitelout reached down and seized his son by his thick arm, roughly pulling him to his feet.

"I told yeh te get up!" Spitelout snarled, and Snotlout balked under his gaze.

Hiccup slowly rose to his feet, but he was rooted to the spot as he watched the scene unfolding before him. He had never seen his cousin so terrified, and it was an added shock that Spitelout was the one to instill such fear in him. As far as Hiccup knew, Snotlout was a spoiled, entitled boy who was doted on with both gifts and praise from his parents. He had never heard Spitelout raise his voice at his cousin except during any kind of training, but that did not strike Hiccup as unusualâ€"most Viking parents were prone to bouts of intensity when it came to dragon-slaying training. Each one wanted to their child to be the next great hero of song.

Spitelout hissed something to his son that Hiccup could not quite overhear, though he was not entirely sure that he wanted to. His uncle then marched his cousin towards their house, but not before

Hiccup caught one last fleeting look from Snotlout. It was frightened and pleading, and Hiccup was taken aback that Snotlout was looking to him for anything. He could only imagine something truly awful awaited his cousin in the Jorgenson household to inspire that kind of reaction from him.

It stuck with him, no matter how hard he tried to push it from his mind.

"Dad, is everything...okay between Snotlout and his parents?" Hiccup had dared to ask his father later that night.

Stoick narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he considered his son's question.

"How do yeh mean?"

"I just...I don't know. Today, Snotlout just seemed to be scared of his dad," Hiccup replied. When Stoick remained silent, he added, "I was concerned...for Snotlout."

The words sounded strange, but they were honest, and Stoick's hard gaze softened a bit at his son's genuine compassion.

"Yer uncle, he...expects a lot out of Snotlout," his father answered. Then, like an afterthought, he said, "I also expect a lot out of yeh, too, Hiccup."

It sounded like all the other times his father was being intentionally evasive, and Hiccup was smart enough to know when he was being lied to, or a significant part of the truth was being withheld. He sighed heavily and nodded as his father returned to pondering a worn map of the archipelago, no doubt trying to pinpoint the location of Helheim's Gate. He could get lost in his mental wanderings, muttering things under his breath like, "No, it couldn't be there..." or, "Nothin'. We've already searched..." Apparently the aptitude for deep pondering was another trait they shared—one of the very few that suggested any kind of relation between them.

For all of his kindness, Hiccup often went unrewarded. His father failed to provide him with a satisfactory answer, so he sought out Snotlout, instead, hoping genuine feelings of worry and sympathy would reach through the other boy's thick skull.

They did not.

"Who did you tell?" Snotlout hissed, slamming Hiccup back against the side of a house, green tunic clenched in his fist.

"I—" "No one! I didn't tell anyone!"

Snotlout clenched his jaw, eyes burning with a mixture of pain and ire, as he drew back his other fist.

"Wait! _Wait!_" Hiccup pleaded, holding up his hands submissively. "Who would _I_ tell?"

Snotlout seemed to consider his words, realizing it was much more believable that no one would bother to hear what Hiccup had to say. He lowered his fist.

"Is...is everything okay, though?"

"Shut up!" Snotlout snapped. "It's none of your fucking business!"

Hiccup raised his eyebrows, unaware his cousin utilized such harsh language at their age.

"This!" Snotlout said, pointing at a rather fresh-looking black eye, "I earned by wrestling with two other, much bigger kids!"

"Earned?"

"Yes!" Snotlout replied firmly. Then, his voice faltered as he added, "Earned..."

That was the last they ever spoke of the subject for several years, even though glimpsing the ugly truth had made Hiccup far more sensitive to the conflict just barely hidden within the Jorgenson household. His cousin rejected his sympathy and concern, and so Hiccup tried to ignore what was becoming increasingly obvious to him.

"Pick it up!" Spitelout snapped as Snotlout scrambled to retrieve a much too heavy war-hammer that had slipped from his hands.

"S-Sorry!" Snotlout stammered, and his father responded to his apology with a hard smack to the back of his head.

Snotlout caught his cousin's eye as he passed, but Hiccup quickly averted his gaze to the grass, knowing any special attention he gave to the situation would be repaid with physical battery. After all, beating him up was the only outlet Snotlout had. He could not hurt his friends, and he dare not fight back against his father, so hitting Hiccup had become safe. In his quest for superiority, it had also become acceptable. Nobody questioned it. Everyone else was alright with it, and Hiccup, who had once thought all the kicks and punches were excessive attempts to flaunt Jorgenson dominance over the Haddock clan, had come to realize Snotlout was numbing his grief—transferring every painful bit of abuse from his body to Hiccup's with each instance of physical aggression. If he was going to hurt, then surely, his cousin needed to hurt too—that was along the lines of Snotlout's logic, as Hiccup understood it. After all, it probably made very little sense to his dim-witted cousin that he, who was supposedly superior to Hiccup, had to endure his own physical torment behind closed doors—punishment when he failed to be less than better than Hiccup in every way. It explained why a small, insignificant tumble into the dirt had infuriated his uncle, and why Snotlout was so terrified of the consequences over such a meaningless event. To the Jorgensons, that little bit of embarrassment—that brief moment of being bested by a Haddock—meant everything.

Hiccup had stopped fighting it, then. He took every blow from Snotlout with indignant glares, but determined silence. He no longer provoked the attacks by mocking his cousin's illegitimacy to the chieftom—Snotlout was suffering for it as well, it seemed. Hiccup knew he could never surpass his cousin as a Viking, and so he ceased

his attempts to try. He avoided his Snotlout when he could, and kept his dry, sarcastic comments to a minimum.

Then, things seemed to turn around in an instant.

At fifteen, when dragons had become allies, Hiccup's life changed almost overnight. For him, things got infinitely better, but for Snotlout, they got infinitely worse. With the other teens becoming his close friends, Hiccup hoped Snotlout would come around, but his father had a tight hold on him and so the torment continued. The difference was, Hiccup now had friends and a village to defend him—the very same souls who had once sided with Snotlout. It was a drastic, welcome change for Hiccup, but he could tell Snotlout was privately suffering for it—their fortunes seemed to share an inverse relationship.

On more than one occasion, Hiccup caught his cousin fleeing his house in barely unshed tears, confident he was hidden under the cover of night. Having a Night Fury, however, often kept Hiccup out past the twilight hours, and he had witnessed more than he cared to, coming from the Jorgenson household. Shouting and swearing, sounds of things being thrown—these were all noises Hiccup had heard during his late night outings with Toothless.

Snotlout kept his dragon in a pen at the academy, and though he insisted it was due to Hookfang's size and flammable nature, Hiccup suspected it was to keep his dragon and his father from one another.

As support dwindled for the crass and callous Viking behavior of before, Snotlout was losing his social prowess as well, and the other teens had turned to mocking him, impatient with the bravado he used to cover up what was so glaringly obvious to Hiccup.

"Why do you put up with him?" Astrid asked one day, lingering after a lesson.

Hiccup just shrugged, not quite meeting her gaze.

"You don't have to," she continued. "You're better than him, Hiccup. You always were. Now, the village loves you. Everyone realizes how wrong they were, except Snot-brain. He just needs to let whatever issues the two of you have go."

"I appreciate the support, Astrid, but it's more complicated than that," Hiccup replied.

She raised her eyebrows at him and he quickly changed the subject, but it would not be the last time she pried into the issue. The Thawfest games only stoked Astrid's curiosity.

"Why did you throw the race?" she asked as they sought some solitude on a rocky outcropping with their dragons.

"Because you'd still be mad at me if I didn't," he answered, teasingly.

She shook her head and replied, "That isn't the real reason, is it?"

Hiccup recalled the panicked look on Snotlout's face as they neared the finish line, and the sound of utter desperation in his voice as he mulled over what the possible consequences for his failure could be. Hiccup had remembered then that there was more to the Thawfest than bragging rights, and he could not bring himself to condemn Snotlout to his father's angry hands. He intentionally lost, sparing Snotlout undeserved torment, and while he really did not owe his cousin anything, Hiccup understood what besting him would mean for the other boy.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Astrid asked, leaning back against her hands.

"I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Both...either...does it make a difference?"

Astrid shook her head and gave him a small punch to the arm, just to remind him that she still found him foolish.

Five years later still, and Hiccup's life was the complete opposite of what it had once been. His father was training him to be Chief, his people adored him, peace was the normal state of things, and Astrid could not keep her hands off of him. Snotlout had long since been unable to carry out physical assaults, and no one took his claims of superiority seriously. He had been reduced to a joke, and while they had once been pitted against one another, Snotlout and Hiccup were now expected to cooperate. It should have been an easy feat, considering all issues of succession had been definitively settled and there was nothing for Snotlout to gain, but Hiccup noticed the bruises and the barely concealed puffy eyes, which often accompanied Snotlout's redoubled efforts to be completely insufferable. So, he was patient. He tolerated Snotlout's attitude as much as he could, trying to be the peacemaker and the diplomat between his cousin and everyone else. How ironic it was that Snotlout's punching-bag had become his only defender, albeit with an undeniable reluctance.

Hiccup figured some grudges were rooted too deeply, and some differences were too insurmountable. That explained why his uncle remained so bitter, holding Hiccup's success over Snotlout as a constant reminder of his failings and an excuse to vent his frustration out on his own son's skin. What Hiccup did not understand was Snotlout's continued denial of the problem—"his determination never to speak of it"—not even with Hiccup, who was compassionate enough, and finally in a position where he could actually do something about it. All Snotlout needed to do was reach out, but he kept Hiccup at arm's length. Blaming him, and resenting him. He could no longer transpose his pain through physical assault, but he still piled it off onto Hiccup through dissent and bitterness.

It was hurtful and frustrating—as much of their entire relationship had been. Hiccup wanted reconciliation, but Snotlout only wanted him to fail. It was unfair that their family history had set them both on that course, but there they were—rivals when the competition had already been won. Not quite enemies, but unable to be friends.

Then, everything had finally come to a head on Bragaoss. All the raw

emotions came tumbling out of Snotlout in an unstoppable wave. Hiccup had been unsurprised by it all, and admittedly found it about amusing that Snotlout was the one who was taken aback by just how much of the truth Hiccup knew. He likely thought Hiccup had only witnessed his father's temper in passing—rare occasions that did not lend itself to a more comprehensive picture of a violent man—but Hiccup was observant, and damn it, he cared. It was a sentiment that always seemed to make Snotlout even angrier with him.

"I don't want your pity," Snotlout had said before, when Hiccup had defended him against the other teens.

But, for whatever reason, Hiccup continued to give it, as long as his cousin was not being particularly belligerent. That night on Bragaoss, however, Snotlout was not interested in anything Hiccup had to say. He shouted out all his accusations of how Hiccup had supposedly ruined his life. It was funny, in a sad way. Hiccup, while defensive, felt he understood Snotlout perfectly. He had been there once—watching as his cousin enjoyed everything he could not have, but should have had. He knew what it was like to feel misplaced and inferior—to live in a relative's shadow and be constantly reminded of how he did not quite measure up. All the hurt Snotlout was feeling, he had already lived through. He knew it well—feelings of betrayal and injustice. He did not, however, know the pain of physical abuse at the hand of a parent, but Snotlout's unwillingness to accept that their circumstances, past and present, shared some striking similarities, was just a self-imposed barrier with which Snotlout further limited, they could overcome all of the pettiness, all of the pain, and the dirty family history that kept dragging them back down into it, but Snotlout was not willing to let it go, and Hiccup was certain his uncle had a lot to do with that.

Then, they had gone into battle with the Marauders, and it had further exposed all the ways in which they were different, in spite of the cruel way the gods had twisted their lives to somewhat mirror one another. Perhaps, war could influence one to view things differently, or perhaps Snotlout had been away from his father long enough? Whatever the cause, they had left the Marauder stronghold with a deeper appreciation for one another—a genuine camaraderie that had, until then, been mostly faked. Hiccup was not sure what had been the exact root of his cousin's epiphany, but upon returning to Berk, Snotlout had not reverted to his old ways. He was finally agreeable—or as much as he could be. It infuriated Spitelout to see them on friendly terms, but Hiccup did not want his uncle to undo all of the progress the two of them had made. They were going to forget the wounds of sordid family affairs, and one bitter old man could not prevent that.

"Is he going to be okay?" Hiccup muttered to Snotlout in the Great Hall.

They were eating supper, and he could not ignore his uncle's seething stare boring into the back of his head for the entire meal.

"I bet he's going to lose his mind at home," Snotlout said grimly. "If I make it out with one black eye, I'll be lucky. He warned me not to get friendly with you—a warning he's been hissing in my ear since we were five."

"Don't take it from him, Snotlout. You don't have to," Hiccup

insisted.

"And I'm supposed to do what? Move out?" his cousin replied, skeptically.

"Would you like to?"

"Yes, but I'd have to take a wife before I could have a house built. I know you know that."

"An exception can beâ€"

"Don't, Hiccup. I'll fight my own battles, cuz," he saidâ€"still unshakeably proud.

Snotlout rose to his feet, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously.

"I'll figure something outâ€"find some way to tell him I don't give a shit if you're Chief or not. He can stay pissed about being a bastard all he wants, but that's not my problem," he said, though he did not sound terribly confident in his own resolve.

"Snotlout, it's going to get better."

"Why? Because we're friends now?" he quipped.

His tone was sarcastic, but the same dislike that plagued their conversations was no longer there. Snotlout was teasingâ€"but not to hurt or annoy. He joked with Hiccup, purely for the sake of bringing them closer while still retaining some sense of familiarity to their interactions.

Hiccup shook his head with a smirk and replied, "I would be insane to consider you friend."

"Insane is what you do, right?" Snotlout retorted, and Hiccup could not argue with that.

What the outcome of that night had been, Hiccup was not sure. He never bothered to ask, and Snotlout never bothered to tellâ€"it was not his business. If anything, Hiccup was aware of a growing divide between his cousin and uncle from that day forward, and Snotlout seemed happierâ€"and that was enough to make Hiccup feel optimistic.

That had been weeks ago, and Hiccup had nearly forgotten it, except that Astrid had brought all of those issues to the surface again, unknowingly.

Toothless and Stormfly landed smoothly in the stables, and Hiccup waited patiently for his lover to get her dragon settled in. Meanwhile, he affectionately patted his Night Fury, who was an absolute glutton for attention, apparently. Toothless warbled softly, soaking in the affection as if he was starved for it. Hiccup just smiled and shook his head.

"Hopeless," he murmured, but his dragon was unashamed.

He continued to stroke Toothless' jaw, unaware they had company until

a dragon's shadow engulfed them.

"What...?"

He turned to see Hookfang standing there, flanked by Snotlout, whose short stature was exaggerated next to his dragon. The Monstrous Nightmare grunted at them—"his version of a pleasant greeting.

"Hey, cuz. I was about to take Hookfang out to stretch his wings. Care for a race around the sea stacks?" Snotlout asked with a challenging smirk.

"You do realize that is, and always will be, a losing battle for you?" Hiccup replied, quirked an eyebrow at his cousin.

"Except for that one time—"!

"—I completely threw that race."

"So you _say_—" "

"So I totally did."

They both just chuckled and Snotlout aimed a gentle punch at his good shoulder.

"Come on! Don't puss out on me!" he exclaimed.

While Hiccup disagreed with his particular choice of vocabulary, he knew there was no real insult intended in it—"that was just Snotlout being Snotlout.

"I can't," he replied, rubbing the spot his cousin had playfully struck. "Astrid and I have plans."

"Ohh," Snotlout responded, raising his eyebrows in amusement. "Right. _Plans_."

Hiccup slapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation.

"That's not—" "I didn't mean—"!

"Say no more!" Snotlout interrupted, holding his hands up in a show of defeat. "I know how important _plans_ can be."

Hiccup just stared at him flatly and Snotlout grinned, clearly achieving his desired effect. He started walking backward toward the open platform from which the dragons took flight, and Hookfang ambled along beside him.

"You still own me a race, cuz—" and don't think you can get out of it, just because we're friends!" Snotlout said, brandishing a finger at him.

"Friends?" Hiccup repeated, folding his arms across his chest. "And is that alright?"

Snotlout dropped his hand to his side with a much more serious demeanor, though his face retained the last vestiges of a rueful

smirk.

"As if we need permission. We're twenty, for Thor's sake! Frankly, Hiccup, who really gives a fuck anymore?"

The answer was obvious but Hiccup decided to humor him, defending his insecurities as he had done in the heat of their discord. They had come such a long way from those days, and the effort he had invested in their relationship could finally be returned. For once, his caring was justified, and so it was more important than ever to protect the scarred and fragile bond between them. After all, healing was not necessarily forgetting, and bruises could fade, but the past that haunted them would not disappear, lingering under the freshly laid kinship as a constant reminder of where they had been, and where they could ultimately return to.

Hiccup shrugged and as was characteristic of him for the past several years, told Snotlout exactly what he needed to hear.

"No one that really matters."

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling a request for a more candid look into Hiccup's personal feelings about his struggles with Snotlout and their family history together, with particular focus on his feelings about Snotlout's relationship with his father, and how that has impacted them both. I tried to delve more deeply into this topic without getting terribly redundant. This one-shot is for cari. I hope it adequately satisfied your request.

Cheers!

10. Got Your Back

****Author's Note: ****This spans pretty much the entire HTTYD timelineâ€"canon, and my fic. I don't think I'm contributing any new content in this one-shot, so I wouldn't be terribly hurt if it gets skimmed over by most. Much like the last one-shot, this retreads content I've already talked about, but just in more detail. So, I apologize for redundancy, but I don't want to deny anyone their requests.

****Disclaimer: ****Stuff n' things.

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Astrid had made it a personal goal to stay out of other people's business. It was not that she did not care, or sympathize, but she felt she did not need the added distraction of anyone else's drama. Life was far less complicated that way. By keeping her attention on physical training, she managed to avoid much of the nonsense the rest of the Hooligan teens got involved inâ€"and it was, for the most part, complete and utter nonsense.

The Twins often argued over their individuality, while still remaining more or less inseparable. Fishlegs whined about his lack of physical ability, and whether or not he should just stick to a fisherman's life insteadâ€"a job that was not immune from the mayhem

of dragon raids, as the other teens liked to point out, rendering his worries over battling dragons a rather moot point. He would have to learn to fight, somehow, or doom himself to rather underwhelming hauls and frequently obliterated fishing vessels. Snotlout, on the other hand, wasted little time on complaining about his problems, and spent most of his energy on talking himself upâ€”making himself seem more competent at things than he really was. He tried to impress herâ€”woo her with his aggrandized accomplishments, which were often unimpressive when stacked against hers. Yes, she heard it all from her friends, over and over again, but she rarely commented on their problems. She did not want to be drawn inâ€”burdened by such pettiness. She had her own concernsâ€”her own worries.

She had to be fearless and tougher than the rest of them, to undo the stigma of cowardice the Flightmare had left on her family. The Hoffersons were not, by any means, fearful. Her mother and father, both, had been known to hold their own against dragonsâ€”but her uncle's untimely demise, and the way he had frozen in battle, had stained her family name with a mark she was determined to get rid of. She would be the fiercest warrior of the next generation. She would leave no doubt of the Hoffersons' capability in battle. She fought and trained harder than any of themâ€”the other teens, who allowed themselves to get wrapped up in trivial issues, or bouts of general carelessness. She could not afford such luxury because, soon, they would find themselves in dragon training, with a very real possibility of injury or death. It was a matter she took very seriously, and so she silently listened to the others' juvenile woes, keeping up a wall that prevented her from also getting wrapped up in the burdens of friendly sympathies.

There was only one other teen she knew of who kept to himself just as much, if not more, than she did. Hiccup was a far cry from what she would consider a friend, or even an acquaintance, really, but for as much hate as he seemed to inspire in people, no one knew that much about him. His attempts to socialize and fit in were often disastrous, and so he preferred to be alone. It was strangeâ€”he was strangeâ€”and while he had the tendency to cause catastrophes, Astrid found his presence more of an annoyance than some great offense. So, like every other issue on Berk that was not related to killing dragons, Astrid was content to ignore Hiccup, thereby generally unperturbed by his anticsâ€”which was more than could be said for the other teens. Gossiping about and insulting the son of the Chief happened to be a favorite pastime. So was tormenting him, apparentlyâ€”trying to trip him, snowballs in the winter, among a number of other excused to pick on the boy. The other teens found great entertainment in it, but Astrid always declined to join in. She never spoke out against the cruel treatmentâ€”again, such juvenile behavior was not her concernâ€”but she did not join in, either. It did not seem right. On only one occasion, did she dare to finally say as much.

"If he's in dragon training with us, I might just die," Ruffnut said one afternoon as their little group sat along the longest dock.

Their boots were lined up behind them, and they were letting their feet dangle in the icy water below.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and the first dragon will finish him off for us," Snotlout said with a nasty grin.

"Isn't that a little mean?" Fishlegs replied, weakly. "I'd settle for just not having him there with us, if that was the case."

"Pfffffft! You're one more useless dragon fact from being in the same category as him," Tuffnut retorted, elbowing him hard in the side.

Fishlegs groaned and clutched his side, shooting the male Thorton a dirty glance.

"I hate you," he grumbled, and the lanky boy just laughed.

"Did you hear Hiccup say he hit a Night Fury last night?" Ruffnut asked, barely containing her mirth.

"Small, wimpy, and crazy!" Snotlout replied. "If he were a sheep or a yak, he would've been put down by now."

The Twins cackled loudly, and Fishlegs wore a half-hearted grin of amusement, but Astrid just stared determinedly at the sparkling water below. It did not seem fair, how relentlessly they teased him, regardless if he was around or not. Sure, Hiccup was a bit of an embarrassment to Berk, but he had never done anything particularly hurtful to anyone—albeit, some of his greatest blunders were accompanied by a bit of collateral damage, but he seemed like he genuinely tried. He was certainly tenacious, and Astrid could at least give him that.

"I think he should be allowed to train with us," she spoke up, startling the other teens. They stared at her incredulously, so she continued, "Maybe he'll surprise you?"

There was a moment's more stunned silence, then all four of the other teens broke out into hysterical laughter.

"That'll be the day!" Tuffnut exclaimed, when he caught his breath.

Astrid just fell quiet again, reminded of why, exactly, it was such a headache to engage her friends when they got so petty.

But Hiccup had surprised them all in the most incredible way. He tamed dragons and took on the Red Death—the indisputable queen of the nest. No one had seen that coming. No one knew he was capable of such courage and selflessness—except for Astrid. She had only known the real Hiccup for a brief time before the events on Dragon Island, but he had impressed her—a very difficult feat. It changed her, or rather, her entire perspective on the village outcast.

When she thought about him, there was no more irritation. The sight of him was no longer exasperating. Hiccup intrigued her—piqued her interest like no one else ever had. She normally blocked the other teens out, finding their conversations uninteresting, but with Hiccup, it was different. Gods, she liked to hear him talk, and she sometimes found herself wishing she had taken the time to listen to him years ago. He was intelligent and insightful. His dry humor could actually make her laugh. Conversations with him were on an entirely different level than they were with anyone else. Before him, Astrid did not know becoming invested in anyone else's life could be

so..._fulfilling_. But his concerns were legitimate. They actually matteredâ€”or rather, they mattered to her. She found herself feeling what he feltâ€”sympathizing and empathizing in ways she never had beforeâ€”and much to her surprise, she found herself reciprocating as much as she could allow herself. She confided in him. Confessed feelings she would not admit to anyone else, even if what she shared was only scratching the surface level of her emotional depthsâ€”as deep as she was willing to let him in. And Hiccup _listened_, responding with an unprecedented compassion and warmth that caught her off guard. It had taken years to develop solid bonds with the other teens, but her connection with Hiccup was effortlessâ€”practically instantaneous, once she had given him a real chance. She was drawn to him, and she could not put her finger on what it wasâ€”that odd sensation that consumed her whenever he was with her. All she knew, for certain, was Hiccup was her closest friend and most trusted confidant.

The other teens had warmed up to him as well, their band of five becoming a solid pack of six. Fishlegs, especially, enjoyed his new friendship with Hiccupâ€”the only other person who was just as enthralled with dragons and staunchly opposed to violence as he was. Hiccup's wealth of knowledge and nearly supernatural understanding of dragons earned him some measure of respect and admiration from the other teens, as well. Of course, with their aptitude towards chaos and disobedience, Hiccup's newfound leadership was not without challenge. While he was no longer considered an embarrassment, he was still rather unconventional for a Viking, which made him an easy target of familiar ridicule.

His slight build, brainy tendencies, and somewhat nasally voice, were preferred topics for the Twins, while Snotlout went right for the more sensitive issuesâ€”his prosthetic, dwelling on past failings, and overemphasizing new ones. The same degree of old disdain was missing from their quipsâ€”at least, as far as the Twins were concerned. Snotlout, however, was determined to make his cousin miserable purely on principle, it seemed, but Hiccup possessed remarkable patience that allowed most comments to roll off his back, so to speak.

Still, Astrid felt defensive of him, though he insisted most of the jabs at his expense did not truly bother him. She figured her feelings just came along with the friendship territory, though she could not honestly say she would so ardently rise to the defense of the other teens. Perhaps, Hiccup was more deserving of the additional support, or Astrid was simply trying to make amends for years of apathy? Either way, any teasing of Hiccup was an instant trigger for her temper.

"Okay, let's take a vote," Fishlegs spoke up after their most recent academy meeting. "All in favor of postponing further academy business until _after_ Snoggletog?"

His pudgy arm immediately flew into the air, and Hiccup was about to make some response, but Snotlout cut him off.

"Does Hiccup count as a whole vote? I mean..." Snotlout asked with a snicker, nodding towards his cousin's metal leg.

Hiccup just sighed heavily, not amused, but Astrid was not about to let anymore rudeness slideâ€”Snotlout had been getting away with it

all morning, and she had done nothing in the interest of keeping the peace. She had been biting her tongue at Hiccup's request, but she drew a line at amputee jokesâ€”she considered his prosthetic limb off-limits, considering what he had done for their people. She drew back her fist and punched Snotlout in the jaw as hard as she could. She was confident the blow would have made his head spin, if that had been possible.

"Astrid, please," Hiccup said wearily.

She ignored him, feeling that she was obligated to stand up for him if he was not going to defend himselfâ€”_someone_ had to.

She grasped Snotlout by the tunic and pulled him dangerously close.

"I don't know what makes you think _you're_ so much better than he is!" she snapped, narrowing her eyes. "What have _you_ ever done for Berk?"

Snotlout just stared back at her, bewildered.

"Personally, if I were you, I would be embarrassed!" Astrid continued. "He's more of a Viking than you will _ever_ be, even minus the one leg! He united our village and dragons, and it's a wonder you can even string two words together!"

Astrid caught a glimpse of Hiccup as she berated his cousin. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, staring at the ground as if her words made him uncomfortable.

At a loss for a dignified retreat from the situation, Snotlout irritably retorted, "Well, just marry him already, if you love him so much!"

He jerked free from her grasp and escaped on his dragon, pride sufficiently wounded, much to Astrid's satisfaction. An awkward silence settled in his wake.

"So...that was productive, Astrid, thank you for that," Hiccup said sarcastically.

She chose to ignore the thinly veiled reprimand and punched him lightly in the shoulder.

"You're welcome," she replied.

"What did that accomplish?" he asked her, frowning.

"Sometimes, Hiccup, it just feels good. You should take more pride in yourself. You're pretty great."

He just gazed back at her, and Astrid thought she saw a glimmer of appreciation somewhere deep within his eyes, but he said nothing further, and she wrestled down the surprising impulse to kiss him.

Even when he was not around, she did not hesitate to speak up on his behalf, feeling as though any jokes at his expense were no longer warranted. Her partiality intrigued the other teens who were used to

years of silence from her. Ruffnut never hesitated to point it out, though Astrid wondered exactly what the other blonde was hoping to achieve, and why, in Thor's name, she even cared.

"You guys need to lay off it," Astrid snapped, as they mucked out their dragons' stalls. "Hiccup _doesn't_ sound like that."

The Twins grinned, proud of their inaccurate impersonation of Hiccup's voice. It was immature on their part, but Astrid just could not ignore it. She had been feeling her ire build with each of Ruffnut's falsely nasally syllables.

"You sure do come to his defense a lot," the female Thortson said, pointedly.

"Because you guys are a couple of jerks," Astrid retorted.

Ruffnut leaned on her shovel, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, and Astrid felt her face burn. As she scooped the last pile of dragon dung from Stormfly's stall, she flung it in the Twins' direction, effectively ending the conversation before it took a more uncomfortable turn.

She had not expected that within a few short months, she would find herself in the middle of an arranged engagement, and while it drove a wedge between her and Hiccup, she still found herself feeling loyal to him. True, their friendship had dissolved out of necessity—"Astrid only wanted to protect him from a larger problem she did not believe he could fix" but she still held a great deal of respect for him. When her fiance made a comment in passing that was less than favorable, Astrid would feel a familiar surge of irritation. Some habits died a slow death, she supposed.

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Stronggut told her during their first Vetrnaetr together—"the first year Astrid had not been looking forward to the holiday season

"How do you mean?" Astrid asked curiously, pretending she had not noticed Hiccup casting her the occasional side long glance from across the Great Hall.

"Like he wants you, or something."

"He doesn't!"

"Astrid, of course he does—but he needs to get over it. I mean, I appreciate what the kid's done for Berk, and all, but he needs to realize when he's already lost," Stronggut said, pompously.

She felt a twinge of anger.

"I didn't realize it was a competition between the two of you," she replied coolly.

Stronggut chuckled and took a sip of ale from his tankard.

"Competition? No. That would mean he actually stood an actual chance," he responded.

"At one point, he stood the best chance..."

Stronggut fell silent, clenching his jaw, and Astrid was glad he had missed the way her fingernails dug into the wood of the table top in an effort to rein in her temper.

Years later, when the miserable stretch of an unwanted engagement was behind her, she was still Hiccup's most outspoken supporter, but the overall need to rise to his defense had steadily dwindled. Snotlout was still a constant source of irritation, but as she and Hiccup grew closer, their interactions with the other young man became sparse. Perhaps, Hiccup had finally reached the zenith of respect around Berk, or perhaps everyone and finally learned not to be unjustly critical of him within ear shot of Astrid? Either way, there were less snide remarks that needed to be addressed with appropriate amounts of physical violence—but Astrid had come to defend Hiccup beyond just verbal attacks.

They had fought the Outcasts, Berserkers, and Marauders—all considerable threats. Next to Hiccup, she was the most accomplished flier, and while her boyfriend's lethality on the back of his Night Fury could not be disputed, he possessed a certain degree of recklessness, and Astrid had saved his life on a number of occasions. Close calls and narrow misses aside, Stormfly's spine shot had taken out a fair share of archers, and her dragon's long-reaching talons had intercepted enough projectiles that Hiccup could be considered eternally indebted to her, had she been keeping track. In all honesty, though, they were equally matched as far as life-saving stunts were considered, and Astrid smiled to herself as their longship drifted slowly back to Baragoss in the aftermath of battle. Her leg ached tremendously, but Hiccup's arm around her waist was pleasantly distracting.

"Thank you for saving me back there," she told him, leaning into his shoulder.

"You're welcome," he replied, kissing her forehead. "I couldn't exactly leave you there to be murdered by Savage, could I? I'm sure you thought you had it, though."

Astrid grinned and said, "I promise not to give you a hard time about those protective instincts anymore."

He laughed softly and held her tighter.

"I don't know if I can accept it, though—you being my defender. I like it being the other way around," she added.

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"It's not allowed to be a mutual thing?" he asked. "I kind of like saving you, too."

"Oh, really?" Astrid teased.

"Yes. You know, Astrid, sometimes it just feels good. I happen to think you're pretty great," he replied.

They gazed at each other, and it was not lost on Astrid that he was only reiterating the words she had once spoke to him.

"I love you, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock," she whispered, for only him to hear.

He leaned in closer and murmured, "The third..."

Astrid just grinned and gave his arm a small pinchâ€"she could not get a good punch in.

"Shut up," she said, and then their lips came together, and nothing else mattered.

"Oh, come _on!_" Tuffnut exclaimed in disgust, as they shared a rather intimate kiss.

They broke apart with soft laughter and Astrid reached up to gently caress the side of his face. He leaned into her touch, and though the battle was over, Astrid could not help feeling that familiar need to stay by his sideâ€"to be his lover and protector in all things. At twenty, he heartily needed it, but Astrid had never loved anyone or anything as deeply as she loved him. Hiccup made her feel some irrational things.

"You know I have your back, right?" she asked, dropping her hand to his chest.

He gazed down at her, mildly perplexed by her question, as if it may be a trick, or at the very least, rhetorical.

"Haven't you always?"

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling a request by erico637 for a more specific look at Astrid defending Hiccup, in more ways than one. I don't necessarily think this is what you originally had in mind, my friend, but I felt like there have been instances already where Astrid kicked ass and protected her lover, in both my fics, and the actual canonâ€"so I explored the more emotional kind of defending, instead. I hope you still find some satisfaction in this. :) It feels a little bit like rehashing to me. :/

11. The Art Of Being Subtle, Sort Of

****Author's Note: ****This fic takes place only a few days after the epilogue of This Maddening EndrÃ¼aga, shortly after the dragon riders return to Berk. This one-shot is Rufflout-centered, but the Hiccstrid makes an appearance, because of course it does. Snotlout POV, for a change!

****Disclaimer: ****I'm half asleep right now, so no.

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Change was not something Vikings had been known to readily embrace. After all, it had taken over three-hundred years for them to entertain the idea that dragons were friendly, trainable creatures that did not deserve to be immediately slain on sight. There had been

needless bloodshed for generations, but such violence had been difficult to overcome. Pride, glory, and vengeance had clouded better judgment for centuries, and with the added hard-headed, stubborn Viking approach to things, it was a wonder any progress had ever been made on Berk—but change came, though it might have taken a few hundred years more than necessary. It had been a long overdue rethinking of Viking philosophy, but the Hairy Hooligan tribe had finally challenged convention—done away with the archaic "violence first, questions later" attitude—and an unprecedented era of peace settled over their small, weather-beaten island. Suddenly, dragons were pets, companions, family. It was a previously unheard of notion that had become so natural to their people. So much had changed in just five short years, that "obstinate" and "unyielding" no longer seemed like accurate descriptions of their character. Truth be told, it was a confusing time as much as it was celebrated—at least, it was for Snotlout.

He loved Hookfang and what the dragon brought to his life—though he would never openly admit that fact to anyone. It had been a rather nice change to trade his war hammer for a saddle, on most occasions. He also preferred soaring through the sky on his Monstrous Nightmare to the long hours of sweaty, spasm-inducing combat training under his father's scrutinizing gaze. Yes. Such changes were certainly welcome, but they had ultimately left him with a bigger question and lingering self-doubt. Where did he, a Viking meant for war, raised on a steady diet of aggression and bravado, fit in within the context of a newer, peace-driven culture? Somehow, even fierce Astrid had been able to make the change, finding her place rather effortlessly by comparison. Snotlout was still looking for his, never admitting he felt like the odd man out among his friends.

The recent events on Bragaoss, while causing a healthy dose of reconciliation between them all, only threw more confusion into Snotlout's life. Suddenly, he and Hiccup were more or less friends after nearly two decades of bitter rivalry. It was a very strange sensation—not wanting to punch the other young man whenever he opened his mouth. Their lack of mutual disgust with one another had been noticed by his father as well, and Snotlout felt constantly on edge, looking for every excuse to avoid his bitter old man and the unease his presence brought with him.

Ruffnut was her very own set of complications, bundled together in her slender, somewhat gangly, frame. By her definition, they were not truly friends, but they were not enemies. They were reluctant allies? Snotlout still was not clear on what the young woman wanted from him. Could he pursue her, or could he not? She seemed agreeable to future advances if they were tasteful—though Snotlout was not entirely sure what that even meant. Very little made sense to him anymore, and it was frustrating. There was only one thing he could really cling to—one thing that seemed to make perfect sense in his otherwise messy jumble of circumstances.

Dragon racing.

The sport was as essential to life as air or water, and he dared another soul on Berk to argue against that fundamental fact. When one lived on such a small, contained spit of rock, distractions from daily chores and the mind-numbing boredom of island-dwelling were integral to one's sanity. Competitions had always been met with considerable pageantry—Thawfest, regattas, and the recently

outdated dragon-slaying, to name a few. It was therefore completely reasonable, and somewhat expected, that a dragon-centered sport would rise to the top of their tribe's collective entertainment, and the accompanying degree of fanaticism was widely embraced. Snotlout found the challenge, the risk of injury, and the overwhelming air of competitive spirit comforting and familiar. It was not a complicated thing, unlike everything else seemed to be for him, and so he was every bit as passionate for the sport as the next Hooligan.

"I'm bettin' on the Thortson Twins te take it, this time," he overheard one man say, as the spectators made their way down to the newly constructed viewing stands.

"Ye always say that!" another scoffed. "They have yet te win a single match since the teams were done away with."

"Aye, but they've got two of 'em! They can carry twice as many sheep at once. Surely, at some pointâ€"

"They can't out-fly Toothless. There's no sense bettin' on that!"

Snotlout sighed in exasperation as he climbed onto Hookfang's back.

The way some of his tribesmen carried on, one would think no one else ever wonâ€"granted, Hiccup and Astrid were usually the favorites for good reason. Hiccup had the best dragonâ€"though Snotlout felt that was purely a matter of personal opinionâ€"and Astrid was competitive to a fault, driving her to pull off some pretty spectacular, game-cinching stunts. Sometimes, Snotlout wondered if he, Fishlegs, and the Twins were merely accessories in a game that often came down to a one-on-one match between the loversâ€"but Snotlout had been known to pull out a win, though such victories were few and far between. His father made it a point to frequently remind him of his losses, and the embarrassment it brought to the Jorgenson Clan, even if no one else seemed to care quite as much as he did. It added more pressure to the game, making Snotlout all the more determined to win, if for no other reason than to placate his father and enjoy some measure of peace at home.

Hookfang glided into the old arena to meet up with the other racers as they finished preparing their dragons for the gameâ€"all except for Fishlegs, who was still on Bragaoss, according to his most recent air mail. Above them, the excited chattering of their fans grew louder as the crowd swelled. Snotlout dismounted his dragon and dared to flash his most charming smile in Ruffnut's direction, but the blonde just scowled. She turned her back to him as she adjusted her saddle and Snotlout wondered what, in her mind, counted as tasteful advances, if not a friendly smile. With barely concealed disappointment, he reached for the wooden buckets of red and yellow paintâ€"his usual racing colors. As he took a paintbrush to his dragon, decorating him, laughter caught his attention with the way it was in such contrast to the sour mood Ruffnut had put him in. He glanced up at Hiccup and Astrid, who were teasing one another in the spirit of friendly competition. The playful banter came natutally to them, it seemed, never crossing that invisible line of becoming too offensive.

"Well, of _course_ you have an advantage," Astrid said. "As skinny as

you are, you don't cause any dragâ€”the real secret to your success."

Hiccup smirked and reached out to pat Stormfly.

"Or maybe you'e just weighing your dragon down with all that chicken? Stormfly's looking a little heavy lately. I think you're overdoing it," he replied.

"_Pffft! _I think you need your eyes checked," she retorted, giving him a light swat to the arm.

They were certainly an odd couple, in Snotlout's opinion. Observing the two them provided very little evidence as to how intimate they really were with each other. One could easily assume they were just close friendsâ€”aside from the occasional kiss they shared in public. Their platonic act was intentional, Snotlout knew, since they both had reputations to uphold, but a confession from Hiccup and a month of camping out with the lovebirds had been plenty enlightening.

Snotlout did not know how his cousin had pulled it offâ€”won the affections of the most unobtainable, yet most desirable, young woman on Berk. He could finally bring himself to admit Hiccup was likable enough, but he had not done anything especially charming to woo Astrid. Somehow, being his usual awkward and untraditional self had been enough to melt the blonde's heart where others had failed. Years of flirting and strutting around the village had gotten Snotlout nowhere with Astrid, and oh, how he had tried and tried. The disgusted looks and hard punches he earned had never deterred him, as discouraging as they were. Granted, seeing the irritation on Hiccup's face as he made advances at their mutual love interest had been its own satisfactionâ€”but that was before he realized that Astrid only had eyes for the Chief's son. Her reasons were a mystery, since her attraction to Hiccup seemed deeper than just his fame and social statusâ€”the typical reasons the other young ladies of Berk wanted him. Snotlout could not put his finger on what drew them together, and Hiccup and Astrid kept their private business to themselves, for the most part. The little world they lived in was closed off to everyone else.

Snotlout had made the mistake of pursuing Astrid for a short while after she and Hiccup had gotten togetherâ€”but how was _he_ to know how serious the two of them had become? Of course, he had teased them as much the Twins did. He mocked the idea of physical intimacy between themâ€”not that he had any proof they did such things at the time. Each of his advances were met with the same reactions he had come to expectâ€”Hiccup's frustration and Astrid's vehement rejection of him. Nothing had changed, it seemed, until a surprise left hook caught him in the jaw on Snoggletog, clearly defining the exclusivity of Hiccup and Astrid's relationship. The punch had not been the most painful blow Snotlout had ever endured, but the fire in his cousin's eyes left no doubt to whom Astrid belonged. His pride had received most of the injury, and it had been even more embarrassing to hear from Hiccup's own mouth a couple months laterâ€”albeit, intoxicated and with slurred speechâ€”that he bedded Astrid frequently, without a trace of shame or regret in his voice. It was insulting to Snotlout's sense of Viking masculinity that he had lost Astrid to someone like Hiccup. To imagine his thin, mild-mannered cousin passionately entwined with a woman like Astrid, enjoying every bit adoration and

sex he had often fantasized about for himself, made him sick to his stomach. But what could he do? Chasing Astrid would have just resulted in more humiliation, and so he had let that fantasy die, resigning himself to a life of bachelorhoodâ€”until he had finally noticed Ruffnut.

Snotlout considered himself closer to the Twins than anyone else, regularly sharing in their crass humor and love of mayhem. So, it was not as if he had never ogled Ruffnut before, but his romantic energy had been previously dedicated to Astrid, leaving the female Thortson deep in friendship territory. It caught him by surprise, the first time he found himself staring at the way she absentmindedly stroked her thick braids, or how blue her eyes could beâ€”a shade that rivaled Astrid's, as a matter of fact. He could talk to Ruffnut much easier than he could talk to Astrid, and he feared her significantly less. They had more in common, and he had hoped their basis of friendship would be enough to win her overâ€”but he had been wrong. Instead of anger or revulsion, Ruffnut rejected him with mere annoyance or, at the very least, indifference. It was an improvement over a fist to the face, but it was a brand new kind of pain. He could not be around her without pursuing her, and he could not pursue her without damaging their friendship. They had already made a severe mistake they could not erase, and Snotlout wanted nothing more than to pick up the pieces, but Ruffnut was not making it easy for him. He was beginning to think she took some kind of twisted pleasure in keeping him confused and frustrated. He tried every genuine act of flattery and every heartfelt gesture he felt comfortable with, and all it earned him was another roll of the eyes. He did not know what more he could doâ€”why he kept failing so miserably despite his best efforts, compared to Hiccup, who did not seem to do anything extraordinary to earn the abundance of Astrid's love for him.

Snotlout set his buckets of paint aside and glanced up at the two lovers again, even though the flow of conversation had ebbed between them. They were tending to their dragons, but the silence did not seem heavy or uncomfortable. They appeared perfectly happy to simply be near one anotherâ€”a strange concept in Snotlout's eyes. It was curious, and the questions rattled too loudly in his mind. He caught his cousin's eye and beckoned him over. Hiccup seemed perplexed, but he scratched Toothless behind an ear nub and made his way over to Snotlout without complaint. They may have reconciled, but it was uncommon for Snotlout to actively seek Hiccup's advice on anything.

"Is everything alright, Snotlout?" Hiccup asked.

There was a hesitancy in his voiceâ€”budding friendship or not, all mistrust had not yet been completely dissolved. Hiccup was ready for an argument, but Snotlout did not intend to give him one.

"It depends," Snotlout replied, and his eyes flickered in Ruffnut's direction.

Hiccup followed his gaze and realization dawned on his face.

"Ah. I see," he responded.

"How do you do it?" Snotlout asked.

"Do what?" Hiccup asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Snotlout nodded in Astrid's direction and his cousin sighed with...exasperation? Pity?

"Really? Now? We're doing this right now?"

"Hiccupâ€"

"I'm just myself, Snotlout. There's no big secret to itâ€"no single special phrase or magical romantic gesture."

"That doesn't work for me," Snotlout replied, waving his hand dismissively.

"Because Ruffnut already knows you, so all of your other advances are just..." Hiccup trailed off, at a loss for the least offensive wording. Then, he added, "Subtlety would do you a world of good."

"Subtlety?" Snotlout said, doubtfully.

"Rightâ€"but that's not exactly one of your strengths, is it?"

Snotlout was not sure if Hiccup was mocking him or not, but he chose to ignore the implicit insult. He opened his mouth the interrogate his cousin further, but a short blow of a distant horn signaled the race was about to begin.

"Was there anything else?" Hiccup asked, already taking a few slow steps backward, toward Toothless.

Snotlout shook his head and climbed up on Hookfang. The other racers mounted their dragons as well, and the familiar fluttering of excitement and rush of competition coursed through Snotlout's muscles. The double blast of the horn could not come soon enough, and when he was racing through the air, Snotlout could lose himself in the joy of the game. There were few rules to abide by, when it came to dragon racing. There were no other concerns than to defeat the competition and come out on topâ€"an order to things that he could both understand and appreciate. As their dragons dodged one another, diving for sheep and weaving between houses and other structures, there was nothing else to worry aboutâ€"no puzzling women, no overbearing fathers. Just the thrill and glory of dragon racing.

The Twins tried their usual tacticsâ€"physically placing their much larger dragon between the other racers and the intended sheep, but Hiccup and Astrid were too fast and too skilled. They outflew any competition, filling their baskets much quicker than the Twins or Snotlout could. Predictably, the game was already dissovling into a struggle between first and second place, with Hiccup and Astrid being the top contenders. Snotlout was trailing close behind them, staying in the game by deliberately targeting sheep that the other racers had not yet spotted. He went for the less obvious marks, thereby avoiding the mad, three-way dive for one poor, unsuspecting sheep.

One foolish animal strayed out in the openâ€"easy pickings. Astrid immediately went for it, unable to resist the potential for any additional point. It was her weakness, but Snotlout hung back,

knowing the Twins would go for it, as well. Tired of last place, Barf and Belch cut off Stormfly's path with a small explosion. Astrid's supporters groaned loudly, spouting harsh insults at the Twins, forgetting that dragon racing was supposed to be a family-friendly spectator sport and there were children present.

The Deadly Nadder squawked indignantly and Astrid whipped around and glared at the Twins.

"Ruff, Tuff! What do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

A black shadow passed beneath them, low to the ground, and snatched up the targeted sheep.

"Great!" Astrid huffed as her dragon and the Twins' resumed their course. "Now, all three of us miss out on the sheep! Way to go." She then turned her attention towards her boyfriend and shouted, "Hiccup! That point was mine and you know it!"

Toothless glided out ahead of the pack as they rounded a corner for the baskets, and it seemed as though Hiccup had not heard her, or he simply did not care when it came to serious competition. As they drew closer, however, Toothless flew towards the opposite end of the baskets from his own. Then, to Snotlout's surprise, the Night Fury dropped the captured sheep into Astrid's basket causing an uproar from the crowd—cheers from those who had bet on Astrid, and boos from those who had bet on Hiccup.

"I think you've got the wrong basket!" Ruffnut called as Toothless slowed his pace, in search of the next sheep.

"What was that?" Tuffnut added, and Snotlout shared in their disappointment.

Dragon racing was serious, and to throw the game was borderline blasphemous to such a wonderful and precious sport.

"It was just a mistake," Hiccup answered with a casual shrug, but Stormfly pulled beside him and he and Astrid shared a meaningful glance.

"Well, now I'm ahead," Astrid told him.

"Really? I haven't been paying that close attention to the score," Hiccup replied.

Snotlout doubted that. When it came to flying, Hiccup and Toothless did not make such ridiculous mistakes. They were like one organism and every movement was deliberate, either by Hiccup's will or his dragon's. He had meant to put the sheep in Astrid's basket, and he had known it would put his girlfriend in the lead. Snotlout just could not figure out why he would do such a thing.

"People are going to be talking about that blunder for a while," Astrid said.

"They'll get over it. After all, that sheep was yours, wasn't it?" Hiccup told her.

They grinned broadly at one another and then Astrid shook her head

before directing Stormfly into a dive. Another sheep had made its appearance, and Hiccup chased after his girlfriend, but Snotlout did not think he really wanted the point. He simply enjoyed the pursuit—following after Astrid, needing to be close to her. They both liked it—the games they played, the teasing, the subtle flirtation in the presence of others. Sometimes, it was as if nothing nor anyone else mattered to them. Hiccup could not care less that they were in a dragon race, or that quite a few of their tribesmen had probably bet on him to win. It was as if Astrid was his priority in almost all things—and at long last, Snotlout thought he understood. The epiphany struck him as he trailed the lovers closely, listening to them laugh as if they were not engaged in a fierce competition.

Hiccup had said his success with Astrid could be attributed to just being himself, but it was more than that. He put Astrid at the center of his entire universe. She was the anchor point of his life—well, her and Toothless. She was more important to him than the outcome of a race, and her happiness always seemed to be one of his greatest concerns. Snotlout did not know, nor really care, if Hiccup had ever verbalized these truths to Astrid—he managed to demonstrate it with his actions. In return, Astrid gave him all her love and devotion to the jealousy of many. It made sense to Snotlout why she had fallen for his very odd cousin. No one could ever love Astrid like Hiccup did—no one cared for nearly as much. Snotlout certainly never had.

He frowned and glanced back over his shoulder at the Twins, who were trailing the pack. He set his eyes on Ruffnut and thought about the advice Hiccup had given him. Subtlety? Perhaps, he had finally come to understand what that meant. Maybe all his advances and one-liners were a bit much, but he did not know if he could completely kick the habit and alter his entire way of thinking—but small steps were a good place to start. Did he love Ruffnut? Maybe. Did he love her as deeply as Hiccup loved Astrid? Snotlout could not honestly say that he did. She did not hold his world together or command control over most of his thoughts, but when she was around, he wanted her attention. He wanted her to smile at him. He wanted her to reciprocate his affections and acknowledge that he cared—that she at least meant something to him. He often thought of the night they spent together and how much regret they both carried. He hoped they could enjoy the same level of intimacy again, but with clearer heads and without the lingering shame. He wanted her to want him too, but even beyond that, he just wanted her to want to be around him in the first place—to like him. To enjoy his company. To find a sense of happiness and clarity in the otherwise confusing mess that was them. It probably did not count as love, but at least it counted for something.

A long, low horn blast shook him from his thoughts, and he heard the other racers cry out, in united excitement, "The black sheep!"

They urged their dragons higher, scanning the rooftops for the coveted airborne animal. Usually, it was either Hiccup or Astrid that caught it, but by divine intervention, the black sheep was launched into the sky much closer to Snotlout than any of the other racers—Hiccup and Astrid would have to turn back for it.

"Go, Hookfang!" Snotlout cheered as his dragon reached out and

snatched the poor, terrified sheep in his large claws.

He basked in his triumph for only a moment before he noticed Stormfly loop up and around him, cutting off the Twins and placing Astrid in a position to steal the sheep out from under himâ€"she was notorious for doing so. With the ten-point boost, Snotlout would win the game, and so he was determined to hold on to his prize. He nudged his dragon with his heels, and Hookfang drew his claws tighter to his body and put on a burst of speed going into the final stretch of the last lap. He could see the baskets and the sheep piled up within them. He would win by a five-point margin over Astrid, and the victory would taste so sweet. A rare win would make his father proud of himâ€"for a few hours, anyway. He would impress the fans, maybe gain some admirers, and if the gods were kind, make him look good in Ruffnut's eyes.

He cast one last glance over his shoulder, noticing Astrid closing in, but with Barf and Belch fighting to pass her, she was not focused enough to pull off any crazy stunts. It was then that he also noticed the Twins' nearly identical disappointed scowlsâ€"Ruffnut's in particular. In their basket were very few sheep, and perhaps, with an additional ten-points, they could take the game. He did not have too much time to contemplate his next move, but with Ruffnut's sour expression, the thought of winning just did not seem quite as grand anymore. Maybe a selfless act would improve her mood? Maybe it would impress her more than his victory? More importantly, maybe she would actually smile at him? His father would be furious, of course, but if it was not Hiccup who won, then maybe the verbal assault to follow would not sting quite as bad?

Snotlout steered Hookfang over to the Thortson basket, and against all his instincts, he dropped the black sheep into it, ending the game. The crowd came alive with outrage, but he did not care. There was a small high that accompanied doing something so chivalrousâ€"which was immediately ruined by Stoick the Vast's booming call of "Astrid takes the game!"

"Wait, what?" Snotlout cried, indignantly.

"Not sure what you were trying to pull, genius, but she still wins by one point!" Tuffnut replied, frown easily distinguishable through his thick facepaint.

Snotlout whipped around to see Astrid take her victory lap over the standsâ€"Toothless hovered patiently for her out ahead of the other racers.

"Iâ€"I thought...I was trying toâ€" " Snotlout stammered, unable to think up an excuse that did not sound pathetic.

"Turns out, dropping a sheep in the wrong basket is a pretty easy mistake to make, isn't it?" Hiccup interjected, looking greatly amused.

Snotlout caught his eye, and only a few weeks ago, his cousin's all-knowing expression would have irritated him to no end, but in that moment, he was glad to have someone understand.

"Ready to go?" Astrid asked Hiccup as she finished indulging her fans.

"After you," he answered.

With that, the two of them sped off to gods knew where, and Snotlout was not very interested in what their plans were for the remainder of the afternoon. He was more concerned with the awkward silence that had settled between him and the Twins as they returned to the old arenaâ€”not at all what he had hoped for. The three of them did not look at one another as they grabbed buckets of water that had previously been set aside. Tuffnut still seemed bitter as he scrubbed the paint off of Belch, but Vikings were not the most gracious of losers.

The glaring lack of conversation persisted as Snotlout reached for a second rag, cleaning his own face since Hookfang was scrubbed of his decorations. He felt idiotic for failing so miserably. He should have paid closer attention to the others' scores, but he was too caught up in the adrenaline of the game and the nervous excitement of making such a bold move. He had accomplished nothing other than embarrassing himself and missing an opportunity to impress Ruffnut. He would have to endure his father's furious diatribe in vain.

"You're such a dumbass. Do you know that?"

Snotlout gave a start and dropped the rag from his face. He had not expected Ruffnut to approach him, and their sudden, very close proximity to one another was alarming.

"Iâ€”I...Well, the baskets...they're close together andâ€”"

"You dropped that sheep in our basket on purpose," Ruffnut interrupted, folding her arms across her chest. "Only an idiot would throw the game, and only a bigger idiot wouldn't be able to throw the game right."

Snotlout scowled and glared at the ground, afraid she would be able to tell how much her words actually hurt him. He was still not comfortable with that kind of vulnerability. He was already feeling foolish and humiliated. He did not need Ruffnut to make it any worse.

"Yeah, yeah. So, I'm a moron. So, I can't count. I should go fuck myself. Anything else?" he grumbled.

"Yeah, there is."

Snotlout braced himself for her scathing insult.

"Thanks."

He glanced up at her, brow furrowed in confusion.

"What?" he asked, not sure he had heard her correctly.

Ruffnut shifted her weight uncomfortably, fidgeting with one of her long braids. Snotlout could not recall seeing her so bashfulâ€”well, as bashful as a Thortson could beâ€”and he thought it was cute and endearing. He did not say anything, though. Such words were demeaning to an adult Hooligan woman, and Snotlout wanted to see just how far his luck would take him.

"You heard me," Ruffnut said, not quite meeting his gaze. With a halfhearted shove of his shoulder, she repeated, "Thanks."

"You didn't win, though," Snotlout replied, bemused.

"Maybe not, but we could've. It's nice to know you don't _always_ think of yourself. That's news to me."

"Good news?" Snotlout asked, hopefully.

Ruffnut just rolled her eyes with an aggravated sigh, but it did not seem completely genuine. The small grin that graced her features as she walked away? Well, that was an entirely different matter. Perhaps selfless actions unaccompanied by desperate flirting had their merits? Perhaps thoughtful gestures could do more to straighten out the mess that existed between him and Ruffnutâ€”provided his own satisfaction was not the obvious goal?

Subtly. A useful tool...in moderation. After all, he was still Snotlout and she was still Ruffnut. He was not about to set a precedent he could not maintain. He was not Hiccup, and Ruffnut certainly was not Astrid, but a small step in the lovers' direction was satisfying enough without any drastic leaps and bounds to follow their example. Snotlout had not intended to entirely fix his issues with Ruffnut in one dragon raceâ€”and their drama was a little too complicated for thatâ€”but it was still more of an improvement than he had seen in their relationship in weeks. He would have to wait until the initial high wore off to assess just how far his romantic gesture had moved him in the right direction, but for the moment, he reveled in even a small success.

One more thing had started to make sense, and Snotlout felt a little bit lighter as he strode over to his dragon.

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling The Wolf Raven's request for some Rufflout-centered dragon racing fluff, exploring my take how the whole "dropping sheep in the girlfriend's basket" thing got started. I'm sorry about the Hiccstrid in your Rufflout, but it seemed necessary.

12. One Shot, Two Shot, Three Shot, New Shot

****Author's Note:**** So, this chapter is going to be a bit different in the sense that it's actually three mini-shots rolled into a single update. See, I like to honor all requests, but some have proven difficult to turn into a more lengthy and meaningful chapter, but I don't want to be a scrooge and just not fulfill them. This was the best compromise I could come up with. Three silly, light-hearted mini-shots for y'all's entertainment. I hope you enjoy, and that none of the request-makers are too disappointed. :)

As always, I apologize for ant typos and errors and such...but if that hasn't stopped y'all from reading by now...

****Disclaimer:**** I don't own the HTTYD franchise. I don't know why I still include these. So no one gets their underpants in a knot over

legalities, I suppose?

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(Mini-shot #1- they are 19 in this)

"Don't you think you are being a bit conspicuous?" Hiccup asked the Twins flatly.

Even in the crowded Great Hall, among the spirited celebration of Snoggletog, it was difficult to miss the Twins standing on their tiptoes, and craning their necks to stare out above the sea of horned helmets.

"Okay. Okay, okay," Tuffnut said, nudging his sister and ignoring Hiccup completely. "You can't tell me that doesn't make you wonder, even just a little."

Hiccup just shook his head while Astrid rolled her eyes impatiently beside him.

"I don't know," Ruffnut replied hesitantly, " and I normally have a good sense about these things."

"Since when?" Snotlout retorted skeptically.

"Is it even any of our business, you guys?" Fishlegs asked in a small voice.

"No. It isn't," Astrid answered firmly, folding her arms across her chest. "I don't understand why you all care so damn much!" â€"her statement was directed at Snotlout and the Twins, specifically.

"Because it's Gobber," Snotlout replied, as if it was the most obvious and legitimate reason in the world for prying into the older man's personal life.

"Yeah. Don't you want to know?" Ruffnut asked, staring at Astrid and Hiccup like they were the ones being unreasonable.

"Honestly, I don't," Astrid answered.

"There! See? There he goes again!" Tuffnut announced, practically dancing on his tiptoes at the exciting prospect of discovering someone else's closely guarded secret.

He, his sister, and Snotlout, had been observing Gobber from across the Great Hall for the past half hour, engaged in deep debate over the older Viking's sexual orientation. It had all started when Snotlout boasted he had overheard one of their fellow tribesmen talking about Gobber's personal taste in lovers, and how it was possibly the opposite of what one would assume it to be, just by looking at him. The Twins had latched on to the idea, making it a sort of challenge to determine the truth. Gobber was blissfully unaware that he was the topic of gossip only a few yards away, and for that, Hiccup was grateful. The older Viking was merely enjoying his holiday, imbibing as he normally did, ignorant that every pat on the back or one-arm hug of the same sex sent Tuffnut into a fit of snickering.

"Let's go," Astrid said, gently tugging on Hiccup's arm. "I'm being smothered by the sudden abundance of dumb."

"Just stop this," Hiccup told the Twins, exasperated. He did not budge, despite Astrid's insistent pulling.

He felt protective of Gobber, in a strange way—or, at the very least, the man's reputation and dignity. His relationship with his mentor may of started off strained and uncomfortable at best, but in almost a decade of working with him, Hiccup had grown to care for the man as family. In his blunt and coarse way, Gobber had often been the one ally Hiccup had—one of the very few souls that had not wanted to punch him on sight, and who actually invested time in trying to make him a better Viking in his awkward, earlier years. Gobber never hesitated to offer him guidance, even if it fell flat. Gobber had been his first confidant, though Hiccup had been careful how much of his personal life and feelings he shared, but the older man was not deaf, blind, or dumb. In fact, Gobber seemed to have had a great deal of insight into his apprentice's woes. He was surprisingly astute, though his commentary and advice often left much to be desired, but he seemed like he genuinely wanted to help in most things—even as Hiccup approached adulthood and no longer needed, nor wanted, Gobber's unusual brand of Viking wisdom.

"Wait a minute!" Snotlout exclaimed, rounding on Hiccup. "You know, don't you?"

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow at his cousin, aware that he, along with Fishlegs and the Twins, were staring at him expectantly.

"No," Hiccup said firmly.

"'No,' you don't know, or 'no,' you aren't going to tell us?" Ruffnut asked, hands on her hips.

"He has to know!" Snotlout said, waving his hand dismissively. "He's worked with the guy for almost ten years. He's bound to have said something, right, Hiccup? You know just about everything about everyone."

"If by 'everything about everyone' you mean the occasional sordid details I pick up from Gobber's colorful stories, then sure, but you're mistaken if you think I'm repeating any of it to you guys—his secrets, or anyone else's. Gobber doesn't go around sharing everyone's business, so I'm not about to go around sharing his," Hiccup retorted irritably.

"No, he's happy to just share those secrets with you," Snotlout replied, frowning.

"For the love of—!" What does it matter?" Hiccup snapped.

"Well, I mean, it's a bit contradictory, isn't it?" Fishlegs spoke up.

Hiccup stared back at the huskier boy incredulously and Fishlegs seemed to turn red at his judgment.

"I thought you didn't think it was our business, Fishlegs," Hiccup

said.

"I don't! But I see why, maybe, Snotlout and the Twins are so interested. I mean, your dad tells stories about Gobber hitting on your mom—women they were both interested in..."

Hiccup appreciated Fishlegs' attempt to avoid the delicate subject of Valka, but as he had never known his mother, he had a rather large empty, numb spot where she was concerned. There was only the occasional sting, but it had been years since he had shed any tears over her.

"Then Snotlout overhears a rumor that Gobber might actually like—" Fishlegs continued, but Astrid interrupted.

"Why would you believe anything that idiot says?" she asked.

"I'm standing right here!" Snotlout hissed.

"Because, well..." Fishlegs hesitated and shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Gobber's never married, has he? He's never even tried. Isn't that strange?"

"No. What's strange is that you've suddenly taken an interest in Gobber's sex life," Hiccup retorted, and Fishlegs immediately cast his gaze to the floor, looking rather ashamed. "It's strange for all of you. In the end, does it make a difference? Sure, he may seem a bit...ambiguous at times, but Gobber's always been eccentric. I don't see why it suddenly concerns any of you. He's still Gobber, regardless, and if the truth would change your opinion of him, then perhaps it's best if you never know. Yes, I happen to know Gobber's preference, just like I know something about each of you—"

"Pffft! What dirt could you possibly have on me?" Snotlout scoffed.

Hiccup just raised an eyebrow at him, and Snotlout's arrogant grin faltered immediately.

"Nevermind," he muttered—"they were both well aware of the secrets Hiccup kept for him.

"The point is, I respect Gobber enough to let the man have his privacy. I suggest you do the same."

With that, he and Astrid took their leave. While Hiccup was certain he had not diminished the others' curiosity, he hoped he had at least instill them with even one more ounce of common sense. As they walked away, he noticed Astrid was gazing at him, greatly amused.

"What?" he asked. "I hope you're not about to ask me what Gobber really—"

"Hiccup, you should know by now that I couldn't care less about what other people do," Astrid replied, shaking her head. "I'm just curious if you really know things about the others that I don't."

"I do," he answered. "One advantage to being an introvert is I've learned how to keep quiet and observe—" I've picked up on a lot of things. Gobber does not have much taste for gossip in a general

senseâ€"he doesn't share much with the rest of the publicâ€"but he does talk a lot to those closest to him who know how to keep their mouth shut."

"Like you?"

"And my dad, yes."

"Hmm..."

Astrid suddenly stepped in front of him, cutting him off.

"Astrid, whatâ€"?"

"What gossip do you have on me?" she asked playfully, narrowing her eyes at him.

He broke out into a grin and replied, "I know that you hate thunderstormsâ€"the ones that are really close and shake the island. Or, you've been using them as a convenient excuse to spend more nights with me. I know that you talk in your sleepâ€"mostly to Stormfly about how you're going to best me and Toothless. I'm probably the only person alive who's heard you speak in a baby voice to the dragon hatchlings down at the stables. That's not a side of you that I think you want anyone else to know about. Oh! You've also got this really cute little freckle just above your leftâ€" _mmmphf_!"

Astrid interrupted him with a rather forceful kiss before anyone overheard his list.

"Good thing you know how to keep secrets," she whispered.

"Well, I'd better. I'm pretty sure my life expectancy depends on it," he teased.

Astrid laughed and ran her hand down his arm before lacing their fingers together. It would have been rather innocent, but there was a suggestiveness in her eyes that told him he might just get to enjoy the gifts of Snoggletog a few hours earlier than most, before the sun rose in the morning. It was a good thing no one really knew how to interpret their subtle body language, except for Gobber, who had a lifetime of practice at concealing his own forbidden attractions and inappropriate romances.

Hiccup glanced up and noticed the older Viking was studying them from across the Great Hall, intrigued. He simply gave Gobber a nod of acknowledgement, which the man returned with a smirk and slight raise of his tankard. That was all the communication that was needed between them. Hiccup knew things, and Gobber knew things. Both of them had enough understanding about the other's personal life to do some damage, but it was a mutual friendship and respect that kept them quiet. Granted, Gobber was much older and respected, so his skeletons were beyond reproach. No one would honestly care, and nothing would come of itâ€"his tastes were not unheard of*â€"but it was Gobber's life and his business to tell. For years of silence, Gobber rewarded Hiccup with the same, even if Hiccup had never admitted anything about what he and Astrid did when alone.

"Tell me something," Hiccup said, glancing down at his lover. "For

curiosity's sake, if you had to make a guess about Gobber..."

"You won't tell me if I'm right or not, though?" Astrid replied.

Hiccup shook his head and Astrid glanced at the older Viking and sighed. She considered him for a moment as he drank, joked, and laughed uproariously with the other men around him.

"Honestly, to me, he's just Gobber."

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****Author's Note:**** This is a request from my editor, DtothaROCK, who wanted me to react to Gobber being made officially gay by Dean DeBlois and Craig Ferguson's ad libbing. Hiccup and Astrid's perspective more or less mirrors my own on the subject. Gobber is just Gobber. His sexual orientation shouldn't matter one bit, gay or straight. It neither adds, nor subtracts, anything from the character. I've always found Gobber to be rather eccentric and ambiguous, like Dumbledore. Why does sexual preference always need to become a thing, nowadays?

* Also worth notingâ€" _"...since the needs of agricultural/pastoral living require reproduction not only to work the farm but also to provide support for the parent in old age, it was expected that no matter what one's affectional preferences were that each individual would marry and reproduce...One's sexual partners mattered little so long as one married, had children, and conformed at least on the surface to societal norms so as not to disturb the community..."_

Interesting tidbits on the Vikings' attitude toward homosexuality, from the Viking Answer Lady Webpage.

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><p>(Mini-shot #2- takes immediately after This Maddening EndrÃ³aga, sometime around the epilogue, while they are still on Bragaoss and shortly before returning to Berkâ€"towards the end of the month.)

"Are you sure?" Astrid asked as Hiccup planted a trail of soft kisses down her bare stomach.

He stopped and gazed up at her with amusement.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked. "I was under the impression you were out of...whatever that magic plant is."

Astrid rolled her eyes and laid back against the fur blankets.

"It's not a 'magic plant'â€" "

"Seems magical enough to meâ€" "

"It's a powder from this dried out root that Gothi collects from the north side of Berkâ€"Ruffnut first told me about it."

"Really, it's alarming how much she actually knows about these

thingsâ€" "

"Well, unlike her, I care about my reputation. I can't exactly go buying it in bulk without arousing suspicion, so I've had to go collect it and dry it myself. Imagine trying to keep a steady supply of dried up old roots hidden from my parents, or explain why, on occasion, my bedroom has a distinctly earthy smell."

"I admire your dedication to the cause," Hiccup teased, and Astrid swatted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Keep joking around and I'm going to make you start hunting for it," she threatened.

He smiled and replied, "Well, there are worse things."

Indeed, Astrid could think of a fewâ€"most of them being the consequences of not properly utilizing the powdered root, or not being especially cautious when she did not have any of it left. Hiccup, however, had always been very patient and understanding about such things. He would also be risking a lot if they were not careful, so he raised no objections to being told when he could and could not have her. If anything, he took it as a challenge to find other means of satisfying one another, and Astrid had not yet had cause to complain about any of his ideas.

He pulled back and removed his tunic, casting it aside.

"I really do enjoy doing this, Astrid," he said, to reassure her in case she had any doubt or worries that he was somehow disappointed.

"I know," she repliedâ€"he could not possibly be half as good at it if he did not find some small pleasure in it.

"You're first, milady," he told her, resuming his line of tender kisses below her navel.

Astrid sighed contentedly and began to squirm in anticipation as he eased her undergarments down her thighs. Honestly, she could have been reciprocating, but as she clutched the furs beneath her with the initial, intense touch of his tongue to her sex, she was glad for the opportunity to enjoy his mouth without distractionâ€"and she knew that was how Hiccup preferred it. He took pride in his ability to make her come undoneâ€"to make her call out his nameâ€"and so all of his consciousness was currently dedicated to that one, vital task. Astrid was more than happy to oblige him.

"Hiccup..." she whispered, running her fingers through his hair.

Sometimes, when the sensations grew too intense, she accidentally pulled on it, but he never seemed too bothered. In fact, whenever they were intimate, he did not seem as if he could be troubled by anything. In such moments, the rest of the world simply did not exist anymore. She was at the very center of his entire universe, which would have been an extremely alarming notion, if it were not for the fact that he was also the center of hers.

She whimpered and writhed, attempting to push closer to the source of

such overwhelming pleasure, but Hiccup held her hips in place, keeping her right where he needed her to provide just the perfect balance of ecstasy and torment. She was coming apartâ€"reduced to an arching, moaning, being of lustâ€"but for Hiccup, it was alright. Only he ever saw her that way, and she wanted him to see her that way. It was liberating. It was exciting. It wasâ€"

Suddenly interrupted.

There came a loud explosion and screaming from outside the tent, and both she and Hiccup bolted upright.

"What, in Thor's name?" Astrid wondered breathlessly, scrambling to pull up her undergarments.

Hiccup had already reached the flap of the tent, pulling it back just far enough to glance around without exposing Astrid.

"The camp's on fire!" he exclaimed.

"Iâ€"What? How?" Astrid stammered, reaching for her discarded clothes.

In light of recent events with the Marauders, her heart began to race and she felt an anxious tightening in her chest. Of course, there was not much of a threat left to them anymore, but she could not deny her trepidation.

"Wait here," Hiccup told her before dashing outside towards the commotion, shirtless.

"Like Hel, I will," Astrid grumbled, hastily pulling on a tunic.

If the camp was truly on fire, and it was an emergency, no one would begrudge her if she was in such a state of undress. The attitude within their little group had become much more relaxed since the Marauder threat had been neutralized. With such an increased sense of togetherness, nearly a month with her friends had taught her such valuable lessons like, Tuffnut harbored a sudden and peculiar disdain for his pants after a certain time of night, Ruffnut seldom wore breast bindings unless they were going into the village, and Snotlout was known to whip it out just about anywhere, in front of anyone, to relieve himself, especially if he had been drinking alcohol. At bedtime, Fishlegs was the most clothed and modest of their group, giving the excuse that he feared being caught undressed, should unforeseen circumstances ariseâ€"a notion which no longer seemed quite as ridiculous.

Astrid hurried outside barefoot, in nothing other than her long tunic and underwear, feeling as though her top just would not fit right, but that was the least of her concerns. Fishlegs' tent was ablaze, and the normally shy and quiet young man was shouting at the Twins, looking quite beside himself.

"It was a joke!" Tuffnut insisted, and Astrid was glad to see they had not yet reached his pants-free hour.

"We weren't aiming for your tent, specifically," Ruffnut added.

"Could have fooled me!" Fishlegs snapped, gesturing to his flaming shelter.

"What's going on here?" Astrid asked, jogging over to them.

Fishlegs turned towards her, thrilled to have reinforcements, but he took one look at her and immediately averted his gaze.

"Fishy went to bed early," Tuffnut began.

"So, we thought we'd have some fun with him," Ruffnut finished.

"_By setting my tent on fire_?" Fishlegs retorted, furiously.

Meatlug was standing behind him, growling in his defense, while Barf and Belch watched the arguing Vikings, looking somewhat remorseful for what he had done, even if his riders did not.

"Oh, for gods' sake! We weren't _trying_ to set it on fireâ€”only make an explosion right above it, to freak you out," Ruffnut explained.

"Our aim was just...a little off," Tuffnut said.

Astrid opened her mouth to interject, but she was distracted as Hookfang and Toothless flew over the camp, extinguishing the flames with buckets of water they had collected from the nearby stream. The two dragons landed smoothly by the damaged tent and their riders dismounted, looking annoyed.

"I was in a deep sleep, dumbasses!" Snotlout grumbledâ€”and indeed, with loose leggings and no shirt on, he did appear to have just rolled out of bed. His tousled hair only amplified the effect.

"What happened?" Hiccup demanded.

The Twins repeated their story and he just slapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation.

"Could you, for once, keep the peace? Or, is that beyond your capacity?" Hiccup asked.

Tuffnut thought for a moment, then answered, "I think it really is beyond our capacity."

Hiccup stared blankly at him, taken aback by the male Thortson's blunt honesty.

"We could've lost the Book of Dragons," Fishlegs told Hiccup, handing him their prized tome.

Hiccup turned it over, checking for damages and appeared relieved to find none.

"I will hold on to it, for safe keepingâ€”at least, until we leave Bragaoss. At that point, I will give it back to you."

"I think that would be best," Fishlegs replied, narrowing his eyes at the Twins, who still seemed as unrepentant as ever for any chaos they

caused.

"The important thing, Fishlegs, is that you are alright," Hiccup said, patting his large shoulder bracingly.

Fishlegs did not seem entirely placated.

"What about my tent?" he asked, indignantly. "It's ruined! Unlike the rest of you, I plan on staying here for a while longer. Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"Take Tuffnut's tent for however long you need it," Astrid suggested. "He can share with Ruffnut. It would be a fitting punishment, considering they're responsible for this mess."

Both Thortsons protested immediately, hissing their complaints over one another.

"I think that's fair," Hiccup replied, and the Twins glared at him.

"After you're done moving your things, Tuff, you can help me with mine," Fishlegs said smugly, in a falsely saccharine tone.

Tuffnut responded with a very rude hand gesture before he and Ruffnut strode off to combine their belongings comfortably. Fishlegs, meanwhile, ducked back inside his own charred tent to see what was destroyed, and what could be salvaged.

"One of these days, I'm going to burst a blood vessel over those two," Hiccup said sarcastically, staring after the Thortson siblings.

"After this month, I'm glad it was just a little Twinsanity, and nothing more," Astrid replied with a shrug.

Hiccup smiled at her, but Snotlout's lingering presence soon caught his attention. He was gaping at Astrid like he had just noticed her lack of clothing, rooted to the spot without a hint of tact or any intention of looking away.

"Snotlout!" Hiccup snapped, stepping in front of Astrid in a chivalrous attempt to protect her modesty.

"What?" the other young man remarked, defensively. "I'mâ€"sheâ€"_look at her!_ Are you even wearing any underpants?"

"That's notâ€"!"

"_Yes!_" Astrid retorted, automatically pulling the hem of her tunic down further. "I thought it was an emergency! Was I supposed to let the camp burn down while I took to time to fully dress, as to not offend your delicate sensibilities?"

"I understand why, but if you're going to blame me for staring, then you should..." Snotlout trailed off as he studied her attire more closely. He seemed confused at first, then realization dawned on his face and he broke out into impish grin. "That's not even your tunic, is it?"

Astrid rolled her eyes and grasped the fabric pointedly.

"Of course, this is my..."

She glanced down and realized that what she had believed to be her loose, thin, gray sleeping tunic was, in fact, a slightly thicker, tighter garment that was dark green in color. She had not paid too much attention to what article of clothing she had thrown on in the initial panic, but it was suddenly glaringly obvious it was not hers. It was longer, and more snug across her breasts and hips, and she felt she looked rather foolishâ€"it also did not help that both Hiccup and Snotlout were snickering. Hiccup, at least, had the decency to try to stifle his laughter, throwing a fist in front of his mouth and pretending to cough.

"Oh, ha _ha_," Astrid muttered, punching both men hard in the shoulderâ€"albeit, she put more strength behind the blow to Snotlout. "It really isn't _that_ funny. Gods!"

"It's kind of funny, in an adorâ€"I mean, it kind of suits you," Hiccup replied, rubbing his shoulder where she had struck him.

Astrid rolled her eyes and turned towards their tent, making a conscious effort to keep Hiccup's tunic pulled far enough down the back of her thighs. She could hear Snotlout's laughter chase her as she hurried away with an awkward gait, bent in the knees as she tried to keep even more of her skin covered. Misfortune had a cruel sense of humor that it had to be Snotlout who had noticed.

Hiccup was not far behind her, entering the tent as she flopped back down on the furs.

"Don't think any of that chaos out there gets you out of finishing what you started," she warned, though it was an empty threat that only served to hide her embarrassmentâ€"Hiccup could hardly feel intimidated, being ordered to do something he thoroughly enjoyed.

"Of course not," he replied calmly, settling down beside her.

He was smart enough not to let his voice betray any of the same amusement she saw hidden in his eyes.

Astrid hastily pulled off his tunic, glad to be rid of the offending garment, but Hiccup seemed slightly disappointed.

"That's a shame," he said.

"Why?"

"It looks a whole lot better on you."

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****Author's Note****: Killing two birds with one mini-shot, here. Request by greenshade15 to see Astrid wearing Hiccup's tunic, and Snotlout's reaction to it. Also, I have received at least a couple PMs and comments about how Hiccup and Astrid could be enjoying so much sex without getting pregnant. Besides the obvious and

unsatisfying answer of a simple, "Because it's my fan fiction and I say so!" I offer this explanation:

I have researched various contraceptive methods throughout early history, and besides a few that made me cringe (seriously...crocodile dung? I'm looking at you, Egypt!), most were either herbal remedies that were often times unreliable, or the rhythm method, pulling out, or breastfeeding. Since I had very little reputable historical techniques to rely on that made sense for our young Viking couple, I have chosen to leave that detail out of my stories. However, since I realize some people aren't satisfied by that, I have offered in the mini-shot above a vague, contrived fictitious herbal remedy to their contraception problem. You're welcome.

* * *

><p>(Mini-shot #3- Hiccup and Astrid are 19 here.)<p>

The thawing of the ice floes brought with it the return of Trader Johann. It was an exciting time of year, considering Berk was still somewhat isolated in its remote, frigid corner of the world. The Chief's orders that their dragons still be kept a secret from most other Viking tribes and mainland civilizations meant that seafaring merchants were the best their village could do, in terms of trading goods with the rest of the world. Hiccup and his friends always looked forward to Johann's arrival, even if they did have to suffer his long-winded stories as they browsed his stock.

Fishlegs was glancing over a scroll from a distant land containing a story told in foreign symbols painted with heavy ink. Depicted beside the strange lettering was a bearded serpent-like creature that had caught Fishlegs' interest.

"Ah, those are what they say their dragons look like in the Far East," Johann said in a mystical tone. "There, they both fear and revere their dragons like gods! You wouldn't catch them riding any of their dragonsâ€"though, I would like to see that."

"Can you read this?" Fishlegs asked excitedly, holding up the scrollâ€"he always searched through Johann's wares for knowledge on foreign dragons, though it did little good without a translator.

"Alas, I cannot," Johann answered apologetically. "But you know, that reminds me of this one time I met this beautiful concubine, whoâ€"

Hiccup shook his head and smiled to himself, shutting out the rest of what was bound to be another one of Johann's elaborate tales. He glanced around at the rest of his friends as they sifted through the assortment of goods from strange, unknown ports. Gobber and his father were there as well, more interested in raw materials for building and trading than fancy trinkets from exotic places. The Twins were busy sniffing jars of unidentified spices while Snotlout was fascinated by a long, narrow blade with similar symbols on the hilt to the ones on Fishlegs' scroll. Astrid held an ornate wooden box in her hands, rummaging through its contents that were hidden from Hiccup's view. Despite the excitement of Johann's visit, it was still bitterly cold, and the snow flurries began to pick up again. Hiccup resolved himself to find something worth buying, or retreat

indoors before he lost all feeling in his fingers.

He crouched down in front of a crate of books, looking for something that would pique his interest—something that would expand his knowledge of the world beyond his map. He skimmed a couple books on foreign plants and herbal medicines—both written in other languages about flora he had never seen—and another, weakly bound book on the joys of a fisherman's life. Though the third book was written in his own language, he found the subject rather unappealing. Setting the first three tomes aside, he picked up another book with no distinct images or writing on its cover.

"That one would be a difficult text to come by, Master Hiccup," said Johann from behind him, making him jump.

"Why would that be?" Hiccup asked curiously, glancing down at the unremarkable book in his hands.

"It comes from the Indies—strange land, mind you. So many new foods and philosophies...They have so many gods, with so many limbs that—"

"The book, Johann?" Hiccup spoke up, hoping to make the man focus.

"Oh, right. Well, they call it the Kami Soota, or something like that, I think. Books are difficult to come by, Master Hiccup, especially multiple copies that are so painstakingly made. This one has been of particular interest to my more elite patrons in ports like Rome and Byzantium—this is the only copy I have left. Mind you, I have not had the pleasure of reading it, myself. I could not begin to tell you what fascinating truths it—put that down!"

Johann dashed towards Snotlout, who had begun swinging the thin, elegant blade around, promptly getting it lodged in the ship's mast. Astrid glanced up caught Hiccup's gaze, rolling her eyes in exasperation at Snotlout's recklessness.

"Find anything interesting?" she asked, approaching him and still holding the ornate box in her hands.

"It depends," he replied, glancing down at the book.

He opened it as Astrid spoke.

"I found this crazy-looking green comb. Johann called it jade—"

But he had stopped listening at that point. There, staring up at him from a random page, was a rather graphic image of two people mid-coitus, intertwined in a rather unusual position. He felt his eyes go wide as he slammed the book shut.

"What?" Astrid asked, alarmed. "What is it?"

"N-nothing," he answered, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. He added, very quickly, "What was that about a comb? Did you find one you liked? I'll buy it for you."

Astrid narrowed her eyes at him.

"Give me the book," she demanded.

"Why?"

"Because you're freaking me out," she replied.

"It's nothing!" he lied. "Just some boring stuff about war and politics andâ€"

She made a grab for it and he reflexively held it out of her reach, only increasing Astrid's suspicion.

"Politics, my ass!" she exclaimed. "Here. Catch."

She tossed the expensive-looking box at him, and his grip loosened on the scandalous text in an attempt to catch it. It was all the opportunity Astrid needed. She snatched the book from his arms as he caught the box, an expression of triumph on her face. She flipped to another random page, her face changing from a look of smugness, to one of complete surprise, then utter bemusement as she tilted the book in her hands.

"Can...can people really bend like that?" she mused, also tilting her head to the side. "I mean, there's flexibility and then there's just..."

Hiccup figured he should not be surprised by his lover's rather intrigued reaction to such erotic material. There was very little that truly shocked and appalled Astrid Hofferson. He was by no means prude, but he did have a higher standard of what was proper and decent than she did. There just seemed something so inherently uncomfortable about an entire how-to book on the most unorthodox kinds of sexâ€complete with the most unashamedly detailed illustrations. To imagine someone, in some corner of the world, drawing such lurid images to the sexual pleasure of foreign strangers was so bizarre.

"Did you buy it?" Astrid asked, glancing up at him.

"What? No!" he replied, defensively. "Iâ€!"

"Why not?"

Hiccup just stared at her, completely taken aback. She appeared completely serious, and Astrid was not very adept at concealing emotions. If she was kidding, it would have been all over her face.

"I-I can't even read it," was his feeble retort.

She gazed back at him flatly, turning the book around to face him.

"With these pictures, do you really need more instruction?" she asked, flashing a picture of a man bending his woman's leg back so far, Hiccup was convinced an aptitude for contortion was a necessity.

"If you're suggesting that weâ€" "

He stopped abruptly as Ruffnut walked by, and Astrid closed the book, keeping a finger in the crease to mark her page. They smiled awkwardly at the female Thortson, who just eyed them suspiciously for a moment, before continuing on her way, perplexed.

"Well, obviously we don't have to try that one," Astrid said, keeping her voice low so they would not be overheard. "But, I'm sure there's other positions that are moreâ€"oh, no. Not that one either. How aboutâ€"wait, I'm not that flexible."

She was flipping through the pages while Hiccup just watched her silently, quirking an eyebrow gradually higher.

"Find anything worthwhile?" Johann asked suddenly, making them both jump with audible yelps.

Astrid snapped the book shut before the nosy merchant could peer curiously over her shoulder.

"We'll take the book!" she remarked brightly, before scampering off with the raunchy text clutched tightly to her chest.

"Whoa! Whâ€"? What is with this 'we' business?" Hiccup called after her, but she had already disembarked the merchant's vessel, leaving him to face Johann's grin and expectant open palm.

"Are you sure you two haven't wed since the last time I visited?" he asked, grinning broadly.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at the man and begrudgingly paid him what was owed.

* * *

><p>Somehow, in spite of all his protest, Hiccup had ended up with book at Astrid's insistence that it was much more likely to go unnoticed among his thingsâ€"books, sketches, and bits of parchment were usual decorations in his room. He had promptly stashed it beneath his bed, where out of sight did not necessarily mean out of mind. As he lie awake, he could practically feel it resting there, taunting him. It was maddening.<p>

Astrid had been eager to explore its contents right away, but he had convinced her they needed to wait until urgent business called his father away for a few hours during the nightâ€"preferably, away from Berk itself. In fact, if his father could somehow fade from existence for one night, that would probably be best. There was a very real possibility they could break somethingâ€"bones or furniture. Hiccup would not rule either out.

Finally, he heard a knock at the door one evening, and Gobber had shown up to enjoy a late night of drinking and high-stakes hnefatafl* in the Great Hall with his father. As dedicated and hardworking a Chief as Stoick undoubtedly was, he took the occasional night to unwind among his closest friends as just another Hooligan. Such times were key to relieving stress and maintaining sanity, and it was not until Hiccup had turned sixteen that he was invited to attend the nights of games and imbibery, as well. He often declined,

feeling oddly out of place, watching the adults he had so long respected growing increasingly intoxicated and belligerent over a simple board game like hnefatafl. He chose to pass up most of those evenings, though he knew Snotlout and the Twins were sure to be there. That night was no exception, and he gave the excuse that he was exhausted and planned on heading to bed early. Almost as soon as the door had shut behind his father, he hastily scribbled a note to Astrid, sending it on its way with Sharpshot. She was at his door within minutes.

"Is your dad in the Great Hall?" she asked, standing by the fire to thaw from even such a short stroll.

"Yes. I assume both your parents are, too?"

She noddedâ€"her father never missed a game.

"Have you looked through the book at all?" she asked, wasting no time.

"No. I haven't touched it," he admitted.

Astrid grinned playfully and teased, "Scared it will bite you?"

"More like I've been scared to see what unimaginable terror my future holds for me," he answered sarcastically.

They both laughed softly and then Astrid kissed him in that way that made it very difficult to refuse her anything. He knew, once they went upstairs, she would take charge. She would seize the book with unrestrained excitement, finding some near-impossible position, purely because she liked the challenge. He would agree to it, of course, in spite of any misgivings he had, because he wanted to please herâ€"to make her happy. Thankfully, Astrid was often reasonable, and she wanted him to take just as much enjoyment as she did from sex. He could only hope she would ultimately decide on a position that would not cause him permanent injury.

* * *

><p>In hindsight, it had been a very wise decision to wait until they could enjoy the freedom of an empty house, except for the two dragons who also called it home. Hiccup had sent Toothless and Sharpshot downstairs from the start, needing no witnesses for what he and Astrid had just done. It had gotten loud, and it had gotten sweaty, and he suspected they had violated at least a half-dozen rules of natural body mechanics.<p>

He collapsed back against the headboard with Astrid in his lap, significantly less tangled up than they had been only moments beforeâ€"he never imagined making love could be so pleasurable as one awkward mass of limbs. They were both panting from a combination of ecstasy and physical exertionâ€"which had somehow only heightened the satisfaction of their release.

"Oh my gods," Astrid mumbled against his skin. "That was unreal."

She was facing him, legs wrapped around him as she buried her face in

his neck. He held her tightly, gently stroking along her back as he stared, dazed, at the ceiling.

"Astrid," he murmured softly, "I have a confession."

She glanced up at him, slightly concerned.

He gave her a small smile and said, "I think I like the book."

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling a request by kirbster676 for a kink!fic involving the Kama Sutra. Okay. So, while I could not indulge this request in a more long, drawn out, and meaningful manner, I decided I could at least take a stab at it in a short, humorous sense. I admit that I laughed out loud when I got the requestâ€"not at you, kirbster676, my friend! The scenario that popped into my head at the thought of Hiccup getting his hands on the book really tickled me. I was giggling to myself like an idiot the whole time I was working on this. That is what happens when I'm up writing into the wee hours of the morning. I get a touch silly and delirious, y'all.

I don't know if I can consider this last mini-shot part of my own canon because the idea of Hiccup hiding a copy of the Kama Sutra under his bed like a naughty magazine just seems a touch ridiculous and OOC...but it was fun to write, and I hope fun to read. If you, my dear readers, want to commit to my canon for your own amusement, then go right ahead.

* However, the term tafl was most commonly used to refer to a game known as hnefa-tafl or "King's Table." [4] Hnefatafl was known in Scandinavia before 400 A.D. and was carried by the Vikings to their colonies in Iceland, Greenland, Britain, Ireland and Wales. The Saxons had their own variant, derived from a common Germanic tafl-game, and this was apparently the only board game known to the Saxons prior to the introduction of chess. [5]

More interesting facts from the Viking Answer Lady Webpage.

13. Mine and Yours

****Author's Note:**** Back to the regular one-shots. I'm fulfilling this one a little bit late, I think, and that's because it was in my reviews and I totally forgot about it. I apologize! I had a list of requests written down, but somehow I missed this one. This chapter is T+, I guess, for heavy...touching? Yeah. Sure. Why not?

This takes after This Maddening EndrÃ¼aga, like, the very afternoon our favorite young Vikings return to Berk from Bragaoss.

Hiccup is now 20. Astrid is still 19, just shy of 20, herself. I really don't know what order the group's birthdays fall in, officially. This just works for my canon.

****Disclaimer:** **I don't own HTTYD.

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Astrid felt a sense of comfort and ease wash over her as soon as Stormfly landed in front of her family home. She knew Hiccup had a surplus of sarcastic comments about Berk, but their small, enduring village had its own charm that she had not yet encountered elsewhere—and neither had Hiccup, for that matter. In spite of his wanderlust and dry remarks, a smile graced his features whenever he returned home from a long flight. Whether it was in the salty island breeze, or the soil, Astrid could not say. Perhaps it was in the underlying air of peace that had settled over a tribe once plagued by violence? Or maybe it was simply the dragons that now inhabited their island, and the abundance of affection their people had developed for them? Regardless of what it was—be it a single factor or the sum of all parts that made Berk...well, Berk—Astrid was pleased to be home.

"Can't say it wasn't an interesting month," she said, as Toothless touched down beside her dragon.

"Interesting may be a bit of an understatement," Hiccup replied, sliding off his Night Fury.

He held out a hand to her and she took it, making for a steadier dismount. As soon as her feet touched the ground, however, he pulled her into him before she could fully catch her balance.

"Jerk!" she teased, laughing softly as she found her footing.

He grinned and gently traced the curve of her cheek with his fingertips until they came to rest beneath her chin. She did not resist as he tilted her face upwards, and her eyes fluttered closed with anticipation as he leaned in to kiss her—but it never came. With impeccable timing, her parents emerged from the house to greet her, and Hiccup withdrew his hands from her as if he had been scalded. He stepped back at least a couple of paces, returning the cordial nod of acknowledgment her father had given him. It was not as if her parents were not aware of their relationship, but Hiccup had a healthy dose of respect for his future in-laws, and he was determined to remain in their good graces, even if it meant maintaining the act that he and Astrid were not, nor had ever been, intimate with one another. Son of the Chief or not, Astrid was pretty certain her father would murder Hiccup if he ever knew, in full detail, what the two of them were getting up during the nights she did not come home. There was already enough speculation and rumors circulating through the village to drain the color from her father's face—and most of them more accurate than not.

"I'm glad te see yeh both made it home safely," he father said. Then he turned toward Hiccup and added, "Thank yeh, fer lookin' out fer her while yeh were away."

"It was my pleasure—though she hardly needed it," Hiccup replied.

"I think I did more looking out for him, to be honest," Astrid remarked playfully.

Hiccup jut stared back at her flatly as her father chuckled, patting him hard on the back.

"Ah, so that's the way of it?"

"More or less," Hiccup answered, inching closer to his dragon. "I hate to be rude, but I really need to check in with my dad."

He was eagerly trying to escape the situation. The discomfort was clear on his face, or rather, it was clear to Astrid. She did not think her parents had the slightest idea how much they intimidated Hiccup. It was as if he feared the wrong glance or subtle gesture would expose them both for the passionate lovers they were, barely able to contain those primal urges which so frequently brought them crashing together like animals in heat. If only Astrid's parents knew the extent of their physicality, they would never let her step outside again, ignorantly making her desire for Hiccup worse. To deny themselves even the smallest and most loving of affections, as simple as a quick kiss on the lips, charged them with a pent up energy like dark storm clouds gathering on the horizon, threatening to burst open with all their wind, and hail, and fury. It was better, for everyone, to let their sexual tempest rage, but in the presence of those that clung to rigorous dating morals and social standards of interactions appropriate for the young and unwed, they managed to contain themselves for a time—however finitely that happened to be.

"I saw yer father headin' fer the docks earlier today," Astrid's father said. "There was a terrible squall that blew in late last night—caused more than one ship te break loose from its mooring and run aground. Yer father was goin' te assist with the repairs, I think."

Hiccup climbed onto Toothless and locked his prosthetic into place.

"Thank you. That's where I'll start. Good to see you again—sir, ma'am," he replied politely. Then, he turned to Astrid and she felt her heart begin to race from the meaningful look in his brilliant green eyes. "If you need anything at all, Astrid, you know where to find me."

His statement dripped with implications that were only obvious to the two of them, and Astrid felt a familiar stirring in the pit of her stomach.

As Toothless took to the sky, she called out, "Yeah, but that's only if you manage to stay put for once!"

She did not know if her lover heard her quip, but she found herself smiling fondly as she stared after him, watching until the Night Fury disappeared among Berk's natural landscape. Hiccup had grown to be quite handsome in his own right, but there was just something so additionally attractive about him when he was on a dragon, and Astrid could so easily succumb to the girlish sentiments welling up inside her—if she allowed herself to do so.

"Such a well-mannered young man," her mother spoke up suddenly, shattering through the giddy haze of her daughter's romantic daydreaming.

"Yes, he is—highly unusual fer a Viking," her father mused, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

Astrid rolled her eyes, tending to Stormfly—unloading her

belongings that weighed her dragon down.

"It's Hiccup," she retorted. "Most of what he does is unusual, but he's trying to make a good impression."

"Well, yeh can tell him he's made it," her mother replied. "So, try te hold on te this one, Astrid."

It was an unnecessary criticism, and indignation rippled up Astrid's spine. She whipped around with narrowed eyes.

"If that's some kind of jab about the arranged marriage, thenâ€"!"

"No, no," her mother interrupted with a dismissive tone. "I only mean that the two of yeh are a smart match, and there are other young ladies trippin' over themselves te get at that boy. Don't give Hiccup a reason..."

"A reason to _what_?" Astrid asked, though she already knew the answer.

Her mother merely shrugged and accompanied her father back inside the house, leaving her with Stormfly and her surge of annoyance. Astrid knew, in the woman's own strange way, her mother was trying to give her advice and was, overall, extremely supportive of her daughter's relationship with the Chief's son. Astrid hoped, deep down, it came from a place of loveâ€"those maternal inclinations that wanted to see her only daughter happyâ€"but her mother often came at it from the offensive angle of grooming her for social promotion. She spoke about an inevitable marriage between the Haddocks and Hoffersons like some strategic move to better their family, even though their clan was already highly reputed. It was irritating, to say the least, and Astrid practically tore off Stormfly's saddle in frustration. Her Nadder gave a soft cry of concern.

"I'm sorry girl," Astrid cooed, stroking her dragon's snout reassuringly. "I'm just blowing off steam."

Stormfly blinked her large, yellow eyes and Astrid thought, just maybe, her dragon understood.

"Well, wouldn't you be angry, too?" she asked. "I mean, there's absolutely no regard for _my_ feelings. It's almost like she doesn't care at all if I actually love Hiccup or notâ€"which I do, by the way, just so we're clear."

Stormfly snorted and jerked head in response.

"I know! I thought it was pretty obvious, too, but she's all 'sit up straight, Astrid' and 'it's time yeh learned te cook and sew, Astrid.' All of that so I can be a proper wife to the Chiefâ€"as if Hiccup really cares about any of it. Does she think he'll lose interest if I can't stitch up a hole in the pants, or prepare a passable _skause?_"

Astrid sighed heavily and Stormfly nudged her sympathetically. She appreciated the show of support,

"Thanks, girl. I just don't understand why she feels the need to be

that way," she said, brow furrowed. "Why bring up how desirable Hiccup is around Berk? I already know thatâ€"I see the way the other girls gawk at him, or giggle like idiots if he gives them a smile...he's just friendly, that's all. It doesn't mean anything. It's not like he's providing them invitations to..."

She trailed off, realizing the more she spoke, the more her mother's words were getting to herâ€"more importantly, she realized why they were getting her.

She had been wrestling with feelings of jealousy for the past month, always feeling like she might be gradually losing it, carrying an unshakeable suspicion that there was an unspoken attraction between Hiccup and Heather, no matter how firmly Hiccup had denied it. The way Heather had looked at him, and the way she like to stand too close to him, and the way Hiccup was so damn permissive of her behavior. What was Astrid supposed to think? She never doubted Hiccup loved her deeply, but if a beautiful girl like Heather was so ready and willing. The insinuation had made Hiccup angry, of courseâ€"well, as angry as he typically got with her, which was somewhere around the vague and halfhearted territory of slightly miffedâ€"but for all of his denial, insisting there was nothing between them, Heather had openly admitted she kissed him. Twice.

Why had Hiccup deliberately failed to mention it?

Heather had explained that he did not reciprocate, and that he had been unhappy with her for supposedly forcing herself on himâ€"but then, why did he not say anything? Astrid's mind kept returning to that same question, digging in with a stubbornness. It was not like he had blatantly lied, but withholding such an important truth hurt just about the sameâ€"especially after his ongoing promise to be more open and forthcoming with her. It still stung for even such a small betrayal. It was a form of deception that led to more troubling questionsâ€"was there even more to the story than Heather let on? Was Hiccup's silence due to a secret enjoyment of the kiss he was too ashamed to admit to? Was the attraction really one-sidedâ€"or was Hiccup being dishonest about that, too? Was there anyone else? Could there be anyone else? After all, her mother was so eager to point out all the opportunities on Berk, awaiting a moment's infidelity.

Feeling a bit nauseous, Astrid buried her face into Stormfly's neck, letting out a tense, shaky breath. The onslaught of emotions was overwhelming for her, and she had never been very skilled at managing even a more steady outpouring. Her dragon growled softly and the vibrations beneath her thick, scaly hide were oddly soothing.

"Thanks Stormfly," she mumbled against the Nadder's skin. She pulled back and added, "I know you probably don't understand what I'm saying, but it's nice to pretend I'm not just some crazy person, talking to myself."

The Nadder growled in what Astrid took to be a sort of agreement. She smiled faintly, and patted her dragon's flank.

"We've been traveling for almost two days," she told Stormfly. "I think it's about time for a bath."

* * *

><p>The various rivers and streams that carved their way through Berk were a source of refuge from the summer sun. Protected by the shade of the dense forests, they had long since been the favorite sites for bathing, swimming, and general horseplay among Hooligan children. One location, in particular, had been a usual hangout of Astrid and her friends since they were small. It held fond memories of seasons past when she, Snotlout, and the Twins, would hold competitions over who could jump out the farthest into the deep pocket of cool water that ran down from the island's snowcapped peaks, wrapping around a sharp bend on its journey to the rolling sea. When Astrid was an adolescent, the same sparkling stream had seen its fair share of hormonally-driven shenanigansâ€”girls bathing and gossiping loudly to attract the attention of the boys hiding among the rocks and trees, trying to catch a glimpse of forbidden feminine curves, unaware their presence was already well known. As an adult, it had become a place where she and Hiccup could spend the occasional moment together under the watchful eyes of their protective dragons, poised to alert them of any unwanted visitors that headed their way.<p>

The years marched on, and people changed, but the rivers remained unwavering in their flow and direction, always ready to serve as an inviting break to those that needed it. Astrid still enjoyed the familiar bend, reminiscing over time she had spent there whenever she submerged herself in the refreshing current. It was strange, however, that she was visiting the tranquil spot alone. The surrounding woods felt eerily quiet and still as she stood by herself on the embankmentâ€”usually, she was accompanied by her friends or her lover. She might have felt more unsettled, but Stormfly did not seem perturbed by the silence. The Deadly Nadder charged into the stream, luxuriating in its cool embrace as she splashed water over herself, bathing in a similar fashion to the song birds that skipped among the rocks.

Astrid smiled, feeling a bit more relaxed as she began to shed her clothing, folding it up neatly as she set it aside. If her dragon was at peace in the forest, then so was she, and she made quick work of removing her undergarments before joining Stormfly.

The water came up to her ribs, and the temperature was shocking at firstâ€”just like that initial submersion had always beenâ€”but her skin quickly adjusted to the chill of the mountain-born stream, and the tingling sensation it caused. In her hand, she held her composite comb, fingers tracingly idly over its decorative knotwork pattern as she squeezed it in her palm. She undid her intricate braid, letting her hair fall loose and heavy down her back, raking her other hand through it until it was sufficiently unplaited. She then took a breath and dipped below the surface of the stream, only to immediately reemerge into the warmth of summer filtering down between the gaps in the trees. It felt incredible after nearly two days of baking in the direct sunlight atop her dragon. She sighed contentedly and began to pull her comb through her damp, flaxen strands, letting her mind wander.

She quickly became lost to thoughts dragon racing and her upcoming birthday, wondering how she should spend it and with whom. Of course, one of those answers was obvious, but it only served to remind her he was angry with Hiccup, and in an instant, her peaceful reverie was

washed away like a wayward leaf in the swirling current. She sighed again, but it was a noise of frustration. She was as hurt as she was bitter and confused about the whole thing.

Hiccup had not withheld anything from her for a long timeâ€”not when she explicitly asked him for a direct answer. He was not a liar, at least, not to her. It just did not make sense that it had been Heather who told her about the kissesâ€”two separate events which could have been insignificant if it were not for the fact that the truth had been kept from her by the one person she trusted most, and _for what?_ Her mind was left to fill in the blanks in the story, in the absence of Hiccup's reasoning, and her jealousy took her to negative placesâ€”ones where she had previously never been given cause to go.

She ceased her combing and gazed absentmindedly at the water that danced around her body. Among her anger she felt guilt, which surprised her. Hiccup had never given her a reason to doubt him, and yet she had repeatedly thrown accusations at him, which were baseless other than what her own jealous mind could fabricate. She did not want to believe he was capable of cheating, yet she kept pressing him like she anticipated his answer would change. She did not know to what end. Maybe to satisfy any deep insecurities she would not admit to. Everyone had them, did they not? Hers were only made worse by her mother's warnings and her own jealous imaginings, but she was not being fair, projecting them onto Hiccup. Still, he had been dishonest and it hurt, and she needed to hear the truth from his own mouth before she could put the issue to rest.

Stormfly suddenly squawked excitedly at the sky, and Astrid was pulled from her thoughts with a nasty jolt. She glanced at her dragon, who was fidgeting happily and flapping her wingsâ€”a dance Astrid knew well. Sure enough, another dragon's shadow passed overhead, and she did not need a second guess to whom it belonged. With the rustle of leaves, Toothless appeared only a moment later, landing smoothly on the bank of the stream. He shook his head and shoulders, shifting his bulk beneath his shiny black scales. There was no denying the Night Fury was an impressive specimen of dragon, no matter how many times Astrid laid eyes on him. Hiccup leaned forward and scratched Toothless along his wide jaw, and the dragon practically purred, dissolving any illusion of a fearsome creature.

"How did you know I was here?" Astrid asked, feeling a conflicting knot of emotionsâ€”giddiness at the sight of her lover, but irritation at his presence as well.

"Actually, I didn't," Hiccup replied, dismounting. "It's purely a wonderful coincidence that our minds are in the same place."

He turned to Toothless and freed the impatient Night Fury from his prosthetic flying apparatus. It was such a complicated piece of engineering, but Hiccup always handled it with ease. He made it appear effortless to remove, and soon, Toothless was bounding into the stream to wrestle with Stormfly, large tongue flopping out of the side of his mouth. Astrid held her arms up to shield her face from the dragons' violent splashing.

"Sorry," Hiccup apologized, though he was clearly amused.

He began to undress and Astrid averted her gaze, lest she forget she was supposed to be upset with him. A silence fell between them, though she doubted Hiccup noticed as he busied himself with his clothing. In spite of her frustration, she did not like the heavy atmosphere that lingered in the air. To her, it was palpable, and she was not yet ready to enter an argumentâ€”not until they were face-to-face.

"I thought you had to meet with your dad," Astrid said, staring determinedly at the playful dragons, instead of where her eyes really wanted to look.

"I did," he answered, "but he was busy with the busted ships from last night's storm. We exchanged a few wordsâ€”mostly, I let him know our trip went alright. We'll talk more this evening. I don't plan to give him more of the story than is necessary."

Astrid frowned, feeling that was becoming a pattern of his.

She heard the unmistakable sound of his metal leg unlatching, followed shortly thereafter by the splashing of water and ripples at her back. She knew she could not keep avoiding him, and it was childish to try. She slowly turned to face him, shielding her breasts with her arms. She did not know what she hoped to accomplishâ€”it was not as if he had not already seen them, touched them, and had his mouth all over themâ€”but it felt right, to protect her from the vulnerability only he made her feel.

She glanced up at him and her breath caught. Gods, why did he have to look at her that wayâ€”like no one else existed?

He waded over to her, moving remarkably well for only having one fully functional leg. Only a couple times did he nearly stumble before he found his footing in front of her. He gently grasped her shoulders, both out of affection and the need to steady his balance, but the touch sent a hot thrill coursing through Astrid's veins. She felt her heart hammering in her chest, fighting the urge to both wrap herself around him, and slap him across the face. Her desire to do either was equally intense.

"Hiccup..." she began, but her words failed her.

"I still owe you that kiss from earlier," he said, misinterpreting her hesitancy for desire.

For the second time, he leaned in, but Astrid quickly turned her head to the side, and his lips merely brushed her cheek. His reaction was immediate, and she felt his hold on her slacken as he backed away, looking startled and confused by the rejection.

"Astrid, whatâ€”?"

She shrugged his hands off of her completely, and in her guarded body language, he found the answer. He wobbled slightly as he reestablished his balance.

"You're angry with me," he saidâ€”a statement, not a question.

"Observant," Astrid muttered, and she wandered up to the embankment,

tossing her comb up by her clothing.

When she turned back around, he looked pensive, brow furrowed in thought as he undoubtedly searched recent memory for some kind of blatant transgression.

"I don'tâ€”d-did I _say_ something?" he stammered, truly perplexed. "Whatever it is, Astrid, I promise I didn'tâ€”"

"No, Hiccup. Talking too much has never been the problemâ€”at least not where you and I are concerned," she replied, folding her arms across her chest once more.

His confusion only became more pronounced as he stated, "Then help me out here, because I'm lost."

Astrid sighed heavily and gazed out into the forest, clenching her jaw.

Words. They were so problematic for her. She knew what she wanted to say, but how to put it so she did not come across as jealous and petty? Perhaps, it was unavoidable. How else could one accuse his or her lover of being unfaithful with no other evidence to go on but their own paranoia and self-doubt? No matter how she phrased it, she was a jealous girlfriend seething with envy of some other woman, who had no importance in her life apart from what Astrid chose to give her. Which, considering the circumstances, was currently a lot.

Uncertain of herself and how to begin, Astrid chose action over speech, as she so often did. She reached up and placed a hand on the back of her lover's head, twisting her fingers in his auburn hair, possessively. She forced him forward and crushed their lips together, reclaiming what some _harlot_ saw fit to try to take from her. It made the bile rise in her throat, to imagine Heatherâ€”supposedly, a friendâ€”leaning in with eyes shut blissfully, enjoying what did not belong to her. Until her confession, Astrid believed she was the only person who knew what Hiccup's lips felt like, tasted like, and she took pride in it. Knowing she was the only woman that he had kissed and touchedâ€”that he wanted no one elseâ€”was both comforting and personally satisfying. Upon learning what Heather had done, she could no longer claim such exclusivity to her lover. She was fiercely jealous and resentful, and it hurt.

She pulled away roughly, releasing him to hide her nudity againâ€”more symbolic than anything else. Hiccup looked bewildered, unsure if he was meant to have enjoyed it or not.

"I...I don't understandâ€”" he floundered.

"Was that how she did it?" Astrid asked, eyes blazing. She felt bolder thenâ€”more in control.

"What?"

"Heather!" She nearly spat the name out. "When she kissed you! Was that how she did it?"

His green eyes widened in surprise, and it only made her angrierâ€”he had no intention of telling her, it seemed.

"How do you know about that?" he asked quietly.

"She told me before we leftâ€"but why didn't _you?_ Twice, Hiccup! She kissed you _twice_...and you couldn't even tell me once," she said, her fingernails digging into her arms to distract from the lump in her throat.

He looked genuinely remorseful, but was at a loss for wordsâ€"unusual for someone so often articulate.

"_Why_ didn't you tell me?" she continued.

"I told her she needed to say something, or I woâ€"!"

"After all that reassurance that nothing was going on between the two of you, you lied toâ€"!"

"I didn't lie," he interrupted calmly.

Astrid scoffed.

"I _didn't lie_, " he insisted. "You asked me if there was anything going on between Heather and meâ€"if I have feelings for her. I don't. That's the truth! I never liedâ€"!"

"You and I have a very different idea of what 'nothing going on' means," she retorted bitterly.

Hiccup pressed a hand to his forehead as if he was trying to ward off an old headacheâ€"as if he had the right!

"Did you like it...when she kissed you?" Astrid inquired, beginning to delve into her insecurities.

His gaze met hers at once, resolute. In that moment, she knew she could not deny his honesty, whatever he said to her. His eyes had always been the most telling part of him.

"No," he answered firmly. "She forced herself on me on both occasions. I never gave her an invitation, and I never would."

"She seems to think otherwise, considering she came back a second time!"

"What do you want me to say, Astrid? _What?_ Do you _want_ me to tell you that I asked for itâ€"that I enjoyed it? That Heather and I met up inside the air mail hut for a midday tryst in front of an audience of Terrible Terrors?"

Even though he was being facetious, his words still burned and she raised her fist to strike him, hesitating as her lip quivered ever-so-slightly. He did not flinch.

"I told her plainly that it was a mistakeâ€"that I'm not, nor have ever been, interested in her. She was pretty embarrassed. I made it quite clear that it couldn't happen again," he explained.

She lowered her fist, slowly.

"Why did it even happen a second time?"

"Desperation, I think. I don't know. I couldn't tell you what was going through her head," he replied.

Astrid studied him carefully, eyes narrowed. Whether he had wanted Heather's affections or not, it did not excuse the fact that he had withheld knowledge of the kisses from her, intentionally.

"Why did she have to tell me? It should've been you. Why were you keeping secrets for her?"

His silence on the issue had been its own form of emotional infidelity, if he did it to protect Heather in some measure. It meant that, by even a small degree, he valued Heather over her—enough to consider her feelings first. Astrid could not bear the thought that Hiccup put any other woman before her. His disloyalty did not have to be purely physical to sting.

"I didn't keep it a secret for her," he answered. "I did it for you. Granted, I told her she needed to say something, but I never really thought she would. I didn't realize she had said anything to you at all. I kind of wish she hadn't."

In her anger, it was a ridiculous and impossible notion. She had to resist the urge to laugh out loud.

"Oh, sure—because that makes so much sense!"

"Astrid, I—"

"Please, Hiccup. Explain to me how you kept the truth from me for my sake—not to cover your ass, or hers!"

"I would, if you just—"

"Because, obviously, I don't need to know if you've been kissing any—!"

"Astrid, listen!" he snapped, grasping her firmly by the shoulders. "I didn't kiss her, and I certainly didn't want her to kiss me—but she did. I never told you because there was always something much more important going on—something else that mattered so much more than either kiss. Both of which I considered to be insignificant."

"Insignificant?" she repeated incredulously—"not the word she would have chosen."

"Yes. They only mattered at all because I already have you, and so they were inappropriate. They didn't make me feel anything—except exasperation and pity, maybe. Compared to everything else that was going on, I hardly spared them a thought."

"If they didn't matter, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because the first time she kissed me was during Vetrnaetr two years ago. You and I were fighting, and Heather assured me that the kiss was a one-time thing. I didn't see what was to be gained by telling you about it after you and I had already made up. It seemed

counterproductive, especially when I really believed she never would try to kiss me again."

She just stared at him, her anger starting to ebb a little. Even if she disagreed with his reasons, he was starting to make sense according to his logic as she understood it.

"On Bragaoss, we were fighting a war and I didn't think you needed the added distraction. I didn't tell you afterwards because, well, things were finally peaceful again and I didn't want to ruin it. Maybe it was selfish of me, but I wanted to spend the rest of the month with you, happy."

Astrid rolled her eyes and finally dropped her arms by her side, relaxing her body language. In his mind, he believed he was saving her some heartache, however temporary it would have been. His silence had not been for himself, or for Heather. To him, both instances had truly been two kisses that had meant nothing, and amounted to nothing. There were no more gaps left for Astrid's paranoid imagination to fill, and the insecurities faded from the forefront of her mind. Only the jealousy born of possessive tendencies remained.

"You should have told me," she stated, frowning. "I needed to hear it from you, not her."

"In hindsight, yes. You're right. We would've avoided all of this, but I'm not immune from bad decisions, it seems. I thought I was saving you some upset over two stupid and ultimately irrelevant things. I guess I was wrong. I only made it worse by not saying anything, in spite of all my good intentions," Hiccup said, sounding almost defeated. "I'm sorry, Astrid."

She was inclined to forgive him, but while she no longer doubted his faithfulness, a couple unsettling questions lingered behind. She needed to ask—"to find some resolution. To put the issue of Heather, or anyone else, to rest indefinitely.

"Indulge me one last time," she said, taking a step closer to him. "You feel nothing for Heather? You've never felt anything for her? Not even a fleeting attraction?"

"Any attraction I might have felt because she would, occasionally, remind me of you," he replied honestly.

Astrid wrinkled her nose at the idea.

"We look nothing alike," she retorted, flatly.

"You braid your hair the same way—or, remarkably similar," he said. "You're both smart and passionate—self-assured. Her laugh sounds a lot like yours. That's about where any and all attraction to her ends."

"In the ways she reminds you of me?"

"Yes, and only in those ways. It took me a little while to figure that out."

"So, there were times when you wanted her?" Astrid asked, feeling

her stomach knot unpleasantly.

"No. I never wanted her. I only found her pretty," he corrected. Then, he added, "She's a pretty girl, Astrid, nothing more. Not to me."

"And on Berk? There is no one else who has ever...?"

He actually laughed and replied, "Like who? Ruffnut?"

Astrid felt his hands begin to slide down her arms, making her skin tingle for reasons unrelated to the cool mountain stream. She had no more anger left in her, and she gazed up at him, feeling a little foolish.

"Hiccup..." she began, unsure of what remained to be said. Surely, there was something—an apology she owed for all her accusations, or at the very least, an explanation—but words had never been her strength, and Hiccup always seemed to understand.

He just smiled and pulled her closer still. She gave no resistance.

"If it would please you, milady, I would really like to kiss you now," he told her softly.

There was no more hesitation, and their lips came together with true affection, erasing whatever invisible stain Heather had left in her impetuosity. Astrid's arms came around him, hands gliding over his back and shoulders, feeling the definition of his muscles as he held her tightly against him. There was a sense of mutual possessiveness in their embrace, but she welcomed it. She knew Hiccup believed she belonged to him just as much as she felt he was indisputably hers. It was not a forced arrangement. There was no sense of entrapment in their relationship. Instead, Astrid gave herself over to Hiccup with a willingness that he readily and enthusiastically returned. He had made it clear. He wanted no one else—he had never wanted anyone else. He was hers entirely, and Astrid found comfort in that fact as her hands roamed over him. Her fingertips danced over the scar on his right shoulder—a mark that only reinforced his devotion to her. It had been stupid, really, to assume he would have given Heather a second glance when he had already fought and bled for her, instead. It was nearly inconceivable that he would put his hands on anyone else, with the way he caressed her body, handling every curve as if they were the manifestation of every one of his fantasies.

As he ran his tongue over her bottom lip, he silenced any further doubts she had about his commitment. The heat that they generated in spite of the surrounding water—her breasts pressing against his chest and their thighs rubbing together, creating the sweetest kind of friction—melted away her insecurities. She made the faintest of whimpers as his left hand traveled down her abdomen, leaving a searing trail of desire on her skin. Her body yearned for him, the thrumming of anticipation and need growing harder to ignore. His name fell from her lips in a sultry whisper as the very same hand slipped between her thighs with unapologetic eagerness. Two impulsive kisses suddenly seemed so inconsequential as his fingers manipulated her with all of the same skill he used to forge and craft such astounding things. He worked her just as expertly, building her pleasure with the greatest of care and consideration. No one else could possibly

know, or _would_ know, what it was like to be loved by Hiccup Horrendous Haddock"of that, Astrid was finally certain, squashing her jealous demons.

She wound her fingers in his hair as she had done not too long ago, holding on with a commanding grip that made him moan softly. Their lips parted for only a moment, but their eyes met, and both of them"green and blue"reflected the same simple truth. Their love was absolutely exclusive.

Astrid kissed him tenderly and against his lips, she breathed, "Mine."

He smiled and murmured in agreement, "Yours."

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****Author's Note:**** Request by upsetsanddownfalls for a confrontation about Heather's kisses. I suppose this does wrap that storyline up nicely, with a sexy little bow at the end. Sorry my friend, for losing your request in the shuffle! Better late than never...?

EDIT: Added a couple lines of dialogue to make the story a little more consistent with _This Maddening EndrÅ%aga_. _Thank you, Nagareboshi Star, for giving me the heads up I needed to make a clearer connection between what was said in that story and what was said in this one-shot. Nothing really changed as far as content, but it helps to complete the picture. :)_

14. The Void That Remains

****Author's Note**:** This one-shot spans the HTTYD canon timeline, and my own. Massive spoilers for HTTYD2...but if you haven't see the sequel by now, what are you waiting for? You can buy it on DVD. You gotta get on that.

Takes place mainly between HTTYD2 and _This Is All Part Of the Grieving Process_.

Nothing raunchy in this chapter"just many feels. Not exactly the warm, fluffy kind.

****Disclaimer:**** I do not own the How To Train Your Dragon franchise. I just borrow from it.

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Astrid awoke to the tossing and turning of the body beside her. It was not the first time since their encounter with Drago Bludvist, and it would not be the last. She was getting used to being roused in such a manner more often than not, but instead of frustration, she was deeply concerned. Hiccup had not yet mentioned his restlessness to her, likely unaware that she knew he no longer slept through most nights.

She opened her eyes slowly, but could not make out anything in the pitch blackness. There was a new moon in the night sky, and the bedroom window was shut tightly to ward off the inreasing chill of the impending winter. There were no faint slivers of light from the

stars to illuminate the darkness, so Astrid rolled on to her side and reached out for her lover, but all she encountered was an empty bundle of blankets. She could still feel his presence just beyond her fingertips, and she figured he must be sitting up on the very edge of the bed. As if to confirm her belief, she then heard the distinct latching of Hiccup's prosthetic, followed by a faint creaking of the bed as he rose from it. There came a brief rustling of clothing and her lover's mismatched footsteps as he quietly crossed the room, trying in vain not to wake her.

"Let's go, Toothless," Hiccup whispered to his dragon.

The Night Fury gave a soft rumble in the back of his throat before obediently moving from his stone slab, shaking off any lingering grogginess.

"_Shhh,_ " came Hiccup's gentle reprimand.

Toothless warbled ever-so-softlyâ€”his version of a heartfelt apology.

The two of them left the bedroom together, and Astrid continued to listen as the front door opened and closed. A few minutes of silence followed where she did not hear anything moreâ€”a period where she could only assume Hiccup was dressing Toothless for flightâ€”before the unmistakable beating of dragon's wings passed by the bedroom window. She heard Toothless' exhilarated roar as he rushed off into the night sky, truly in his element as long as he was flying, uninhibited, with Hiccup.

Astrid sighed heavily and rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling, though she could not really make it out in the oppressive darkness. She felt additional weight beside with her as Sharpshot took advantage of Hiccup's absence, occupying his human's side of the bed and the warmth it provided. The opportunistic Terrible Terror curled up against Astrid, and she stroked the tiny dragon absentmindedly, lost in thoughts of her lover, though that was nothing unusual. Hiccup was often on her mind, but in the recent days following the attack on Berk, her heart was burdened with an almost constant worry for him. Hiccup was distressedâ€”that much was perfectly clear. Or, at the very least, it was clear to Astrid, but she had long since been atune to the subtle nuances in his voice or body language that clued her in to his actual state of mind, in spite of the brave face he would put on for the rest of the village.

In all honesty, Astrid had not really expected anything different, in light of all that had happened to Hiccup in such a short amount of time. It had not even been a full week since his father's untimely passing and his subsequent promotion to Chief of Berkâ€”a position he had previously resisted. He was suddenly shouldering an immense responsibility for which he felt unpreparedâ€”he had confided that much in her, at least. All the while, he grieved inwardly for his father as he struggled to accept and understand his new role as the reluctant leader of his entire people. Berk looked to him for answers and guidance, and Hiccup was still so unsure of himself. He did not yet have a clear sense of who he was as a Chiefâ€”the very reason he had been so against the idea in the first place. Astrid and Valka had tried to encourage him by voicing the potential they saw in him, but it did not replace the advice he wantedâ€”the advice he so desperately needed to bolster his confidence. What he was lacking was

the mentorship of his father—a seasoned Chief who could truly relate to the insecurities Hiccup felt, having once been there, himself. Stoick the Vast had spent the past five years trying to groom his son into the next leader of Berk, but Hiccup had often responded with rebelliousness or sarcasm, expressing little interest in the particular brand of wisdom his father had to impart—unless it, somehow, translated into a smoother handling of dragons or his unruly friends. Then, without warning, his father was gone, and when it came to matters of ruling Berk, he just seemed so horribly alone.

Astrid could not even begin to imagine his regret, though she saw the shadows of it on his face.

She sat up and Sharpshot settled into her lap, growling contentedly, but she did not pay him much attention aside from the occasional pat on the head. Her heart ached for Hiccup and seldom had she felt so useless to him. After all, what could she do? What could she say? He had not even come to her for comfort—at least, not openly. He sought her touch and seemed to be more at ease in her embrace, but there still a distance to him—an invisible barrier of inner turmoil she had not yet penetrated, for he would not let her near it. He was trying to shield her from his anguish. Of that much, she was certain. Only when they made love was he completely with her, freed from everything else that burdened him. His heart found its momentary respite in those intimate moments together, but it was fleeting. He would inevitably slip away again, to that dark place he was drawn to. She knew him well and knew that, in his grief, he had reverted back to safeguarding his deeper emotions—that defense mechanism he had taught himself in the earlier years of his social isolation. Normally, she would call him out on it, but she did not have it in her so shortly after such a tragedy. Perhaps, Hiccup was also trying to protect himself with his silence? With the additional stress of being the new and inexperienced Chief, he did not yet seem ready to cope with Stoick's death. After all, he did not seem to have the time to properly mourn, with Berk so desperately needing him in the aftermath of Drago's siege. He could compartmentalize better than anyone she knew, and so that was how he managed to get out of bed each day. That was how he forced the same smile and all the friendliness Berk had come to expect from him—but that was also why he could not sleep at night. In the still of early morning hours, there was nothing to distract him. Nothing to keep the contents of one of his mind's many compartments from spilling into the other, combining and amplifying into one overflowing mass of despair.

He did not admit it to Astrid, and for once she did not pry, but she knew. It was evident in the way she caught him bury his face in his hands when he thought no one was looking, or the way he anxiously tapped his prosthetic against the ground as he pondered something particularly upsetting—what that happened to be, at any given time, she could only guess and trust that, eventually, Hiccup would come to her when he ready to fall apart. She would be there for him, ready to put all the pieces of him back together again. She hoped it would happen soon. She, too, needed to decompress, and together they could heal as they had done before.

Yes, she was also hurting, but it was an inconsequential stinging when compared to what Hiccup was dealing with. Still, she could not deny she wanted to talk about it—to make sense of and find some closure after all that had happened. On some level, Stoick's death

affected everyone on Berkâ€”certain people, more than others. She could not honestly say the former Chief had been a close friend, and she could not mourn him on that level, but in a way, he had been family in practice, if not yet by a legal marriage. Drago had taken a part of her family away from her before she even had the chance to really enjoy it, and she loathed the very memory of him for it. She had not always been on such familiar terms with the Chief, but their two clans shared a good enough rapport. As she became closer to Hiccup, she also became closer to his father, and there was an entire future that was robbed from them. Astrid would never have her father-in-law, and any children she someday had with Hiccup would never know their grandfatherâ€”what a remarkable man and formidable Viking he was, and how proud they made him. Stories would never be enough to fully capture the legend the man was bound to become, and it made Astrid sick to know that was all her children would ever have of him.

She began raking her finger through her hair, combing out any tangles so she could twist it into a simple braid. It was a soothing activity for her, and as she begun to weave strands of her long hair together, she reflected on her entire relationship with Stoick the Vast, and how dramatically it had changed over five short years.

Initially, she had known Stoick only as the Chief of their tribe. What other perspective could she have for the first part of her young life? She knew her father was close to the man on some level, if not actual friends. She witnessed them speak on occasion, generally in good spirits. Stoick was, and could only be, the Chief to her thenâ€”a figure to be admired and respected. He was a sight to behold, slaying dragons. He made it look easy, as if the gods had fashioned him for nothing else. He was fierce and fearless, and she wanted nothing more than to emulate such warriors in their villagesâ€”the epitomes of Viking strength and valor. So, she dedicated herself to her training from the time she was old enough to hold a battle-axe. She knew she could never be as large and mighty, but she could be every bit as bold, tough, and courageous. It was her goal, and she worked tirelessly towards it, abandoning any care she had for the feminine and domesticâ€”Hooligan women did not overly concern themselves with such things to begin with, beyond what was absolutely necessary for the household.

She remembered the first time she had actually been noticed by Stoick the Vastâ€”really noticed, and commended on her talent. She was about six or seven. She listened in as the Chief and her father discussed her abilities with such praise. She swung her axe, pretending to be completely enveloped in her training as the men remarked on her skill. Stoick stated his belief that she would become one of the great dragon-slayers of the next generation, and do her family legacy proud. She had wanted to burst, then. Elated from the recognition and the prospect of becoming one of the "greats". The idea that she might one day stand among heroes like Stoick, Gobber, and her father, practically made her glow with pride. She wanted nothing moreâ€”to prove herself as a Viking and a Hofferson. She was encouraged to train harder still, hungry for the affirmation from the very Viking she admired the most. She longed for the occasional praise Stoick threw her way, validating her effortsâ€”showering her with the compliments he never seem to spare for his son. There was no higher honor as a young Hooligan.

Then, she was a teenager. She was fifteen and very beautiful,

according to most who bothered to comment on it. She did not want to be seen that wayâ€”as a potential bride and object of desire. It undermined the reputation she had worked so hard to establish for herself, with every drop of blood and sweat. She then sought the Chief's approval, not to build her confidenceâ€”she already had thatâ€”but to maintain it. Stoick the Vast still saw her potential as a warrior, and she lived for the moments he would say as much.

Then, there came Hiccup and his dragons, and he turned everything upsidedown. The weak, scrawny, otherwise invisible young man was suddenly taking her gloryâ€”taking away the praise she coveted from the one person from whom it mattered most to hear it. How could Hiccup be better Viking? How could he suddenly be so deserving of such acclaim? How dare he divert the attention she wanted from the man she practically hero-worshipped?

Suddenly, almost overnight, dragons were no longer enemies. They were not the wild, unruly beasts of nightmares. Suddenly, they were companions, and it was all Hiccup's doing. She realized, then, that the definition of what it was to be a true Viking had shifted in the eyes of their people. Considering that new revelation, Hiccup was every bit deserving of the admiration and respect he received after what he had accomplishedâ€”continued to accomplish. Even Astrid had to admit that he had left her in complete awe of him and what he was capable of. Still, with the overall attitude towards dragon-killing becoming the polar opposite of what it had been for three-hundred years, she initially struggled to find her relevance.

Hiccup valued her insight as the unofficial second-in-command of the dragon academy they started, and that had meant a lot. She had quickly grown to seek out and respect his opinion on things, and she considered him her best friendâ€”the closest she had ever had. He was certainly the most courteous and intelligent, and it was refreshing. His compliments were definitely flattering, but it just was not the same as the praise she was accustomed to. She felt her overall status among their generation dwindle as muscle was no longer as highly valued as it once had beenâ€”but then there was Stoick. He had come to trust Astrid's judgment and advice about dragons as the highest authority on the subject, next to his own son. Granted, Fishlegs was knowledgeable, but not necessarily in the ways Stoick was looking for when he came to either Hiccup or Astrid. It made her feel significant again, in a way acknowledgment by her peers could not. She could still provide courage and brawn when managing wild or disobedient dragons, or facing threats like the Berserkers and Outcasts. Stoick noticed as much, and his view of her spread through out the entire village as popular opinion, and Astrid had found her sense of purpose again. She could make peace with being second to Hiccup, if it came with recognition of her worth as a Vikingâ€”that her life-long pursuit for physical prowess and perfection still meant something. It was certainly...

Had Hiccup's eyes always been so green? Since when did he smile like that? What was with those damned butterflies in her stomach every time he called her "milady"?

Then, just like that, she was in love. Deeply. Hopelessly. She could not admit it just yet, still wrapped up in the tough and insensitive facade she maintained, and that had been one of her biggest mistakes. She should have told Hiccup much sooner, before her arranged marriage was thrown at her. Perhaps then they could have weathered it

much better until a solution was found, instead of suffering in bitter silence. She felt like there was no one on her side, as she drifted further from her friends and her parents refused to renege on their contract with the Svensons. It was not until one lonely night in the Great Hall that she realized she still had one ally left—one ally that was not her Deadly Nadder.

She sat by herself as her friends laughed happily at the same long table they had occupied for years. Hiccup was with them, but he was angled away from her slightly, and Astrid desperately wished he would look her way, so they could exchange polite smiles, and he would know she still thought about him. A lot. More than she should, considering her engagement.

She sighed heavily in disappointment, picking idly at the loaf of bread on her plate.

"A frown does not suit yeh, Astrid Hofferson," came a deep voice from behind her.

She practically jumped and wheeled around in alarm.

"Chief!" she exclaimed, caught completely off-guard. "I-I, uh..."

She did not know how to respond, or how cordial she was expected to be, considering the man's son seemed to care very little for her anymore.

Stoick just laughed at her floundering, and she felt herself relax a bit in response. He apparently felt no ill will towards her, in spite of her growing distance from Hiccup. It was a comforting notion.

"I thought yeh'd be sittin' with the others," he remarked, gesturing towards the table where her former circle of friends sat.

"I would but...I'm not exactly wanted there, lately," she replied.

Stoick made a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat, and Astrid wondered just how much the man knew about teenage woes—he seemed to know just about everything else that happened on Berk, after all.

"I don't think Hiccup would mind," Stoick said, and Astrid had to resist the urge to laugh out loud.

No matter how friendly their relationship had become since she had first befriended Hiccup, she did not think mocking the Chief of Berk would ever be acceptable behavior.

"I think he might disagree with you," she retorted.

There was a knowing look on Stoick's face that she would not fully come to understand until much later.

"I think yeh'd be surprised," he told her before patting her briefly on the shoulder.

He continued on to where Gobber and her father stood, swapping stories and enjoying their ale. Astrid just started after him,

perplexed.

In retrospect, Stoick had been trying to steer her and Hiccup back together as much as his position of supposed neutrality on her arranged marriage would allow. He could not openly advocate for them to date without overstepping the boundaries of his position, but he continued to be friendly and accepting towards her, and subtle in his suggestions for renewed friendship between them. He, undoubtedly, saw the side of Hiccup's misery that she never did—the heartache and longing that Astrid only recognized as irritation and standoffishness. After all that had happened with the Red Death, Stoick had transformed from a disappointed parent into a proud father who would do just about anything for his son. He held Hiccup to certain standards and obligations as the next Chief of Berk, but he did what he reasonably could to promote his son's happiness. He had come to know, as much as Hiccup let on, that Astrid was paramount to that happiness, and so he was always kind to her. He kept some measure of a relationship alive between her and the Haddock's by making small talk when appropriate and seeming genuinely interested in her new pursuits as a future Svenson. Only after she and Hiccup reconciled did she fully understand what he had been trying to do for the previous three years—keeping her as close as he could while Hiccup pushed further away. Only then, could she appreciate him for it.

Then, she and Hiccup became more serious. A future marriage between them was obvious to anyone with a working pair of eyes. They became physically involved, and though they had never been outright caught in the act, Stoick knew. Hiccup and Astrid knew that he knew. How could he not? It was his house she was always visiting, and always sneaking out of every morning, before the rest of the village came alive. There had been one very awkward and uncomfortable encounter, the morning after the first time she had made love to the Chief's son, but Stoick seemed more amused than upset. Probably because he knew the two lovebirds under his roof had enough sense to be proper and discreet as their relationship evolved, and that the two teens just could not help themselves. On top of that, Hiccup was finally happy again. Regardless, neither Hiccup nor Astrid confessed to anything, and Stoick never asked. Plausible deniability and intentional ignorance. They kept the relationship between Stoick and Astrid comfortable, and they only grew closer from there.

As dragon racing developed into a more organized sport, Stoick celebrated Astrid's achievements as much as Hiccup's. He cheered them both on, and even had a few laughs at his son's expense if Astrid bested him. He never embraced her, as that would not yet have been appropriate, but he was always willing to spare a high-five and good-natured pat on the back. Astrid was always welcome at the Haddock household as if she belonged there, joining them for meals or seeking shelter from the elements. She and Stoick would have long conversations about dragons, Berk, and their mutual fondness for battle-axes while Hiccup observed them quietly, clearly amused by their blossoming camaraderie, independent of him. In many ways, Stoick became like a second father, or at the very least, an uncle-like figure. Astrid enjoyed his company and felt more at ease around the man she once revered as a god-like paragon of Vikingness. He was family, an ally, a mentor. He was a great and generous man in all things. He had been responsible for helping Astrid shape so much of her identity—first, as a warrior, then as a future member of the Haddock clan.

Then, he was dead. Just like that.

Life was cruel and unjust as it handed out various sad fates to those that were the most undeserving. Stoick had so much spirit and vitality for a man his age, and he should have enjoyed many more years as a father, grandfather, husband, friend, and a leader—but he was denied that future. It was all stripped from him by Drago's insatiable greed and bloodlust—forced into a dire situation of self-sacrifice that was ultimately unavoidable for a man who so deeply loved and cherished his son.

Astrid had not cried as she stood with the others on that beach, launching flaming arrows into the sky in a final tribute to a fallen hero. It was not that she did not grieve. Inwardly, her heart felt torn apart from the void Stoick had left behind—from the hole Drago had forcibly put there. She watched that funeral pyre sail off into the distance, burning resolutely on its final voyage to the shores of Valhalla. It burned in both fury and defiance—fury, for a life ended too soon, and defiance of the warlord who had ended it, who had hoped to snuff out the Hooligans' resolve by the murder of either Chief or son, only to fail. That fire raged brilliantly until it was gone from sight, taking with it the dreams of so many, for Stoick had been so deeply loved by nearly everyone that knew him—though it would have been a little too sentimental to say to the man, in life. Astrid only hoped he knew as much before he died, and that he had departed the mortal realm without regret.

How incredibly morbid her thoughts had become lately.

The gnawing sadness began to creep its way up from the pit of her stomach, and she did not know how long she sat there in the darkness with her face in her hands. She did not weep, but she breathed all of her pain and anger into her palms. Perhaps, it would leech even some of it from her soul? Intense emotions were so troublesome.

Sharpshot stirred suddenly, perking up in her lap as the front door opened below them. The dragon was easily excitable, ignorant of the emotional turmoil around him.

Astrid dropped her hands to her side and listened as Hiccup and Toothless moved about downstairs. She waited for a moment to see if they intended to come back to bed, but enough time passed that she realized they did not.

She gave Sharpshot a brief pat on the head and then fumbled her way out of bed, much to the tiny dragon's protest. It was cold and her thin tunic and undergarments did little to shield her from it, but it was unproductive to lie awake in bed and wallow in her gloom any longer. She groped around in the darkness for the door, and as she stood at the top of the stairs, she heard Sharpshot burrowing into the blankets behind her with a satisfied growl. Shaking her head with a small smile, she braced her hand along the wall to guide her way. Thankfully, there was a soft orange glow dimly illuminating the stairs from the hearth below—courtesy of Toothless, no doubt. The path was no longer quite as treacherous, and Astrid made her way down the stairs, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth as soon as her feet hit the first floor.

She expected to find Toothless basking in the warmth of the fire, but

instead, the Night Fury was lying beside Hiccup, resting his head in his rider's lap as he sat at the table. Toothless gazed up at his human with large rounded pupils full of concern while he made a soft rumbling noise, communicating with Hiccup in that strange, supernatural way he always did. Hiccup, meanwhile, had his head propped up with one hand while the other stroked his dragon's head affectionately.

"I'm okay, bud," he told the Night Fury softly, but the tone of his voice was not convincing.

"Are you?" Astrid asked, her voice oddly loud in the otherwise quiet house.

Toothless raised his head with ear nubs perked up in alert, and Hiccup twisted around, mildly startled.

"Astrid!" he said, genuinely surprised to see her standing there. "Did I wake you when we came in? I'm sorry."

"Actually, you woke me when you left," she replied, walking over to him. "I never made it back to sleep."

"Sorry," he repeated, and she just shook her head.

"It's fine, babe," she told him. "_You _should really try to go back to bed, though. You're the Chief. You need rest."

"I know," he said. "I just...can't."

He sounded so defeated and Astrid hurt for him. She reached out and gently ran her fingers through his hair in what was meant to be a comforting gesture.

"Hiccupâ€" she began, but he cut her off.

"Don't look at me like that, Astrid," he said. "I'm alright." Then, after a moment, he amended his statement to, "I will be alright."

"Of course you will be. You're you, after all," she replied. "Just...just know that I'm here for you, Hiccupâ€"if you need me. You know that, right? I'm not going anywhere."

He gazed up at her, considering her intently and the double meaning implied in her words, especially poignant in light of recent loss. He then wrapped his arms around herâ€"one hand between her shoulder blades and the other, on the small of her back, holding her close. He buried his face in her chest and breathed deeply, finding momentary peace in physical touch. Astrid embraced him as well, wrapping one arm around his shoulders while her other hand stroked his hair, cradling his head to her chest. They remained like that for a while, and words need not be spoken.

As she held Hiccup, she remember a conversation she and Stoick once had while she waited in the very same room for her lover to return from a flight with Toothless, off to gods knew where. Astrid knelt in front of Skullcrusher, petting him as Stoick adjusted his saddle.

"Yeh'll need a bigger house built, of courseâ€"when the two of yeh marry," he told her, a teasing gleam in his eye. "Fer all the babiâ€"

"Dragons," Astrid corrected with a grin. "All of the baby dragons. I bet I can persuade Hiccup to let me keep a few of Stormfly's."

"Aye, he won't need much persuadin' of that," Stoick chuckled. He then took a much more serious tone and added, "The two of yeh are good together, yeh know? Yeh...yeh've been good fer him, Astrid. I thank ye fer that."

She felt her cheeks start to burn, so she tried to steer the conversation back to the more lighthearted atmosphere.

"At least I keep him out of troubleâ€"most of the time," she said.

Stoick replied, "It's a full time job."

"Lifelong."

"Then it's a good thing he'll always have yeh, whenever that day comes I'm no longer around."

Astrid smiled fondly at her future father-in-law and responded, "And it's a good thing that's not for a long while, yet."

Stoick beamed at her, as proud as if she was his own daughter.

"Take care of him, Astrid."

"Always."

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****Author's Note:**** Fulfilling a request from The Wolf Raven for a more developed relationship between Astrid and Stoick.
Feels!

Reviews are always nice. :)

15. Under Arvindal's Fire

****Author's Note: ****This predates my storyline, taking place during the TV series. Hiccup and Astrid are 15, and not yet a couple despite their mutual, unspoken attraction to one another. Consider this a continuation of the "Fright of Passage" episode because, well, it pretty much is.

****Disclaimer: ****I don't own the HTTYD franchise.

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The brilliant blue ribbons dancing through the night sky were actually quite beautiful. It was the first time anyone on Berk had the opportunity to really appreciate Arvindal's Fire, since it no longer carried the threat of a meancing, spectral dragon. For the first time in their village's history, the Hairy Hooligans were

gazing skyward at the swirling lights, instead of running for their homes in terror. The Flightmare would just fade into an unpleasant memory of the past, and the Hofferson family name was cleansed of the stain of cowardice in the glowing dragon's presence. It had been a rather positive turn of events in Astrid's eyes and it was, in no small part, thanks to Hiccup.

Always, thanks to Hiccup.

She glanced in his direction and sighed. He was much too selfless, and she wondered if he even had the slightest idea how unusual he was for it. Granted, he was considered odd and atypical Viking for a number of _other_ traits, so perhaps it did not even register with him that his kindness was, in any way, extraordinary?

She had thought his initial interest in helping her track down the Flightmare was due to his desire to study the dragonâ€”train it, even. Then, as they neared the beast and Astrid's desire for vengeance grew, she was certain he had tagged along to stop her from killing the it. No doubt, beheading the dragon would not have sat well with Hiccup, no matter how dangerous and unruly the Flightmare proved itself to be. Astrid was prepared to do it for her family, in spite of all the progress dragon-Viking relations had made over the past several months. When the Hoffersons' honor was at stake, slaying one more dragon seemed like a pittance in comparison. Who would have honestly missed the Flightmare? Who, really, would have blamed her for burying her axe in its skull? The village was celebrating the dragon's absence under the ethereal glow of Arvindal's Fire. Did method really matter if the ends justified the means?

Yes, she supposed.

In hindsight, yes it didâ€”and Hiccup had realized as much. He had come along to stop her from killing the Flightmare, as much for her own sake as the dragon's. When her anger subsided, she would have felt guilty and ashamed. It would not have really cleared her dear uncle's name, either, had they not learned about the dragon's unique ability to freeze its prey. In the end, she would have been left with considerable regret, and Hiccup had enough foresight to know that. Not to mention, he had protected her from the Flightmare's wrath when she had foolishly leapt from Toothless to challenge the beast, at no small risk to himself and his Night Fury. He was able to bear witness to the Flightmare's paralyzing mist-breath, and he had figured out the dragon's attraction to the iridescent algae that kept it returning to Berk each decade. He had led the charge as Toothless, Stormfly, and Meatlug carved a new path for the river, effectively redirecting the Flightmare from Berk, indefinitely. Upon returning to the village, Hiccup had, above all else, been sure to inform their tribe that Fearless Finn Hofferson had been paralyzed by the dragon's breath and was, therefore, not a coward in the least, but every bit as brave as the Hoffersons were often reputed to be.

Maybe training dragons was _not_ the only thing Hiccup ever thought about? Maybe she needed to give him a little more credit?

He was wonderful. Truly considerate, intelligent, and compassionateâ€”unlike anyone she had ever known. She wanted to kiss him, thenâ€”deeply. It was a strange feeling that came over her, stronger than all the other times she had forced her lips on his. The warm, giddy sensation that coarsed through her at the very thought of

stealing another kiss from him extended even further, giving life to a desire she could not name—the need to be near him, to hear his voice, to make him smile, and to touch him. She knew she had feelings for the boy. That much was undeniable, but recently, they were morphing into something foreign. Something powerful—churning, combining, and amplifying into something that was becoming hard to resist, and harder still to conceal.

Dear Odin. She did not love him, did she? The very idea was ridiculous. How could it even be possible? They were only fifteen and had been close friends for just a few months—since the first flight on Toothless she would occasionally daydream about. It was not enough time for something as potent as "love" to develop between them. Surely not! After all, she first felt those new and unexpected stirrings in her heart when they returned to the cove after finding the dragons' nest. As if she could have been in love with him then! It made her want to laugh. It was such a stupid notion—and yet...

Hiccup was leaning back against a stone retaining wall, watching Arvindal's Fire play across the sky in a steady pattern, much like how the waves rolled tirelessly into the shore. Toothless was beside him, having returned to his usual black color, which Astrid found far favorable to the eerie indigo shade provided by the glowing algae from the northern stream. She was content just to watch them, admiring the inseparable duo for reasons that were lost on her, but it was as if Hiccup could sense her interest. He tore his gaze away from the dancing lights and their eyes met. Astrid felt her stomach give an excited twist, and her heart may have possibly skipped an entire beat, but outwardly, she seemed as cool and collected as she always did. She found herself being drawn to him, her legs moving almost of their own accord, but still, no one would have reason to assume she felt anything serious for Hiccup. Gods, she was not even convinced that she did. She was tough. Affection was not something a girl like her had any use for. She did not love Hiccup. She did not love him. She did not love him.

He smiled as she approached and her inner dialogue—her mantra of resistance—fell flat on its face. A strong liking for him. Yes. That seemed more acceptable. She could work with that.

"I think tonight turned out better than anticipated," he told her, and Astrid felt the strong and sudden urge to put her hands on him—she was not sure exactly in what way.

She balled up her fist and delivered a quick punch to his shoulder. There. That was safe.

"I'm beginning to think you like hitting me, even if it isn't warranted," he said flatly, rubbing the spot she had struck.

"That was for being so you," she replied, folding her arms in front of her chest.

"Oh, well that's certainly...vague," he retorted in a sarcastic tone. "I was hoping for a little gratitude, but..."

"Gratitude? For protecting me from the Flightmare? For helping clear my family name? For saving Berk, yet again, from complete disaster?" Astrid asked teasingly.

"Only if any of that justifies a bit of thanks," he answered with a shrug.

Astrid smirked and leaned against the wall beside him and stared up at the brilliant night sky.

"Thanks," she murmured.

She caught his faint grin out of the corner of her eye.

"You're welcome," he replied.

They both gazed up at Arvindal's Fire in comfortable silence. Astrid had never found simply being in another's presence to be so effortless. It must be that strong liking, and nothing more.

"I'm glad we were able to divert the Flightmare without killing it," she spoke up, after a moment.

"Really?" Hiccup asked—he sounded doubtful.

"Sure. I mean, we were able to prove my uncle was fearless, which was really what this was always about for me. In the end, the Flightmare is just another wild dragon, doing what dragons do. It wouldn't have been right to kill it," she explained.

"I'm glad you've had a change of heart, Astrid," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder—it sent a tingling sensation from the top of her head, down to her very toes.

"I think I'm just spending too much time around you, lately," she replied, brushing off his hand. It was too distracting. "You're rubbing off on me."

"You make that sound like a bad thing."

Astrid rolled her eyes and shook her head. It could never be a bad thing. The days were dull whenever she was not around him.

"We learned a lot about the Flightmare, tonight. I bet you'll have a lot of updating to do in the Book of Dragons," she said.

"I believe Fishlegs is already on top of that. He seemed unable to contain himself."

"Well, there is something else we learned, as well—something really surprising."

"What was that?"

"You don't only think about dragons," she teased.

She nearly laughed out loud at the exasperation on his face.

"No, I don't. I'm glad we've cleared that up," he muttered.

Astrid smiled to herself wondering how, when she might possibly have feelings for Hiccup, she could find equal enjoyment in annoying him as she did making him happy? It was peculiar, but more peculiar still

was her overwhleming curiosity in what else he might think about, and how she sincerely hoped he thought about her. Often. She was not sure why it was so important that she might fill up his spare daydreams, but it was. Very important. Vital, even.

"So, what else do you think about?" she asked him, feeling her heart start to thrum nervously in anticipation of his reply.

What was wrong with her? Maybe it was Arvindal's Fire, itselfâ€"casting a mysterious effect upon her as it did the algae in the stream? Maybe she could make it through the rest of the evening without saying or doing something to embarrass herself, doomed to feel the funny head rush of emotion only once every ten years? She could live with that. After all, she only liked Hiccup. A lot. Not enough to be feeling as jittery and self-conscious as she currently did, she reasoned. It did not make sense otherwise. She did not love him. She did not.

Hiccup shifted uncomfortably as he considered his answer, then he said, as neutrally as possible, "People I care about."

The statement was too open-ended. Too much could be inferred in it, and Astrid's mind was racing fast enough to ponder all of those implied meanings.

"People you care about?" she repeated, keeping her face and her voice even as her heart was in a state of panic.

"Yes. Like our tribe. I care about Berk. I wanted to do what was in the best interest of everyone," he added quicklyâ€"Astrid thought he might have been blushing, but the strange blue glow of Arvindal's Fire convinced her she must have imagined it.

Her heart sank a little, feeling terribly foolish and self-absorbed for daring to believe that maybe she had been on the forefront of Hiccup's thoughts and concerns. He had worried about her safety, going up against the Flightmare, and he seemed genuinely happy to help her clear the Hofferson name, but ultimately, it was all done for Berk. Not her. She could have kicked herself. Of course it was for Berk. Every dragon-related accomplishment was in their people's best interest. Why would ridding their village of the Flightmare threat have been any different? Hiccup's selflessness and caring extended beyond just her. He had helped her with the flightmare for reasons beyond fulfilling her own selfish goals.

Astrid could not have been in love with Hiccup, she realized, because such realizations that she was not necessarily at the center of his universe made her vulnerable to being hurt. She just did not do vulnerable.

No, she did not love him. She was not disappointed. The heaviness in her chest was something else entirely. Yes. It had to be something else.

"Well, at any rate, now my family can enjoy Arvindal's Fire without worrying about being made into a joke by idiots, like Snotlout. I'm glad the truth finally came out," she said, trying to steer the subject in a more uplifting direction.

"I don't think as many people believed Finn Hofferson really froze up

with fear as you may think, Astrid. I never did," Hiccup replied.

"What made you so certain?" she asked.

"Because he was a Hofferson, and your family doesn't have the potential for cowardice. Anyone who ever doubted that never knew your family at all, or what a Hofferson is capable of," he answered.

"And you do?" she retorted, skeptically.

"I know you," he said, "and that's all I ever needed."

Astrid felt her resolve snap—it had already been stretched far too taught that night. She grabbed him by the front of his tunic and pulled him in for a kiss, noting the surprise on his face before she pressed her lips against his, rather forcefully. It was a quick gesture of affection—all their kisses were—but Astrid savored it while she could before releasing Hiccup abruptly. He stared back at her, momentarily bewildered, but a sheepish grin soon spread across his face.

He continued, "Although, you do continue to surprise me every now and then..."

Maybe it was not completely outlandish? There was very little about Hiccup that was conventional, so why would any budding romance with him be routine and predictable? Maybe one could fall in love so quickly, and maybe it was not such a terrible thing? Maybe, just maybe, Astrid did love him a little?

Then again, it was not inconceivable that she loved him a lot.

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****Author's Note:**** For warorpeace, who requested a little post-Flightmare fluff. Or rather, I made it fluffy. Sorry about the belated request fulfillment! This was another of those requests I lost in the shuffle. Agh. I feel bad. I_ believe_ I only have one more request after this and I'll have hit on all the ones I have agreed to do. Huzzah!

A short, sweet glance at Astrid coming to grips with the idea that she's in love with Hiccup. Girlfriend, get on that.

****Also,** I'm on Tumblr now, because I received a really nice guest review that told me I should. So, I have crept over there to see what it's all about. e-wills is the username. Oh, and I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm a blog-virgin.******

16. Letters: Part 2

****Author's Note:**** This is the final request I will fulfill for a while, y'all. I had to close myself off to requests after New Year's, so I could continue my overall storyline without any distractions weighing on my mind. This Is All Part Of the Grieving Process is not finished, and I've been meaning to continue it for a while. I really wanted to get these requests done before I forgot any of them,

and before I poured my attention into continuing Hiccup and Astrid's story as I've imagined it. That being said, when I finish This Is All Part Of the Grieving Process, I will start taking requests again, but the overall rate at which I fulfill them might be infuriatingly slow (like, one request every couple of months)â€”my "hiatus" as it were. If you have any burning one-shot ideas for me, hang on to them for a bit longer. Thanks!

This one-shot is actually a continuation of an older one. This is "Letters: Part 2". Hiccup and Astrid are 18. Expect some smluff.

****Disclaimer: ****I do not own HTTYD.

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The snowfall grew heavier as Hiccup and Astrid strolled through the village, maintaining an acceptable distance between them, avoiding unnecessary physical contact so they would not arouse suspicion as they made their way toward the Haddock household. Hiccup noticed Astrid was keeping pace with his stride, and he was conscious of his speed so that he did not seem too eager. While the majority of the tribe was still in the Great Hall, celebrating the Chief's return as they kept warm with food and drink, the two lovers did encounter the occasional passerby. For that reason alone, Hiccup fought the urge to put his hands on Astrid, though every fiber of his being screamed for him to do so. It had been seven days since he had touched herâ€”seven days too long. It was not satisfying enough to merely tug at her braid or rest his hand on the small of her back. His fingers needed to trace over her curves and reacquaint themselves with her skin. It was as soothing as it was titillating to feel her body pressed against his, and the obstacle of geographic separation had turned the relatively short length of one week into what felt like an eternity. Each time he nearly gave into his urges, another Hooligan would emerge from their home, or seemingly appear from nowhere to greet him with an enthusiastic waveâ€”on their way to the Great Hall, presumably. For a while longer, his hands would have to remain innocently at his sides, until he and Astrid were truly alone.

"I'd say Berk missed its golden boy while you were away," she teased, as he returned one woman's greeting with a nod of acknowledgment.

He stared back at his lover and replied, flatly, "'Golden boy'? I think that's a bit of an exaggeration, Astrid."

"Is it so hard for you to accept how important you are around here?" she asked, a smirk playing on the corner of her lips, amused at his discomfort with abundant praise.

"It only matters to me that one, particular person finds me important," he said, and Astrid's grin broadened, though it was accompanied by a roll of her eyes.

"Maybe I missed you," she responded.

Hiccup just laughed softly. Astrid had not written anything too sentimental in her notes to himâ€”not that he found that to be at all surprisingâ€”but he was curious what words were forever obscured by the hasty scribbling of charcoal sprinkled through out her otherwise pristine and neatly composed letters. Astrid was often so precise

that he doubted she had written anything she had not meant to say, initially, and that any crossing out of words or sentences had been done after the fact, once she had time to reflect on how her letter sounded when read back. It was likely she had removed anything especially romantic, and he wondered if they would ever get to a place where Astrid felt comfortable being emotionally open. She had no trouble speaking her mind and telling him how she felt, but it was all in a very matter-of-fact way. It was a rare thing to witness his lover actually feel excessivelyâ€"well, anger and the occasional bout of jealousy, aside.

"So, it sounded like you had a productive trip," Astrid remarked.

She pulled up her hood as the snowflakes began accumulating in her hair, and Hiccup silently decided that she looked adorable in the furry, oversized head-covering.

"It was definitely educational, if nothing else, but I'm not in any hurry to repeat it," he answered.

The ground started to slope upwards as they neared his house. The uneven footing of snow and ice made maneuverability more difficult with his prosthetic leg, and the added strain made him start to ache terribly from the base of his stump to his left hip. He grimaced but hid it from Astrid as they trudged up the hill, never wanting to inspire pity for his amputationâ€"least of all, from his lover.

He maintained an even expression as she asked, "Why not? I thought you found it all pretty interesting."

"Imagine a week trapped on a small island, without dragons, surrounded by a dozen or so duplicates of my dadâ€"with the same look of scrutiny and judgment," he replied. "Then, I think you'll understand my hesitation."

Astrid laughed and said, "Fair enough."

She did not question his slower gait, beating him to the front door and pushing it open without the slightest pause. She was at ease in his house, and he was pleased to know she had grown so comfortable being there, manners be damned. Then again, she had it before they ever dated. He could recall her younger form in his bedroom on more than one occasion, without supervisionâ€"usually to argue about something he had said or doneâ€"which was unheard of for two young, respectable Hooligan teens. Hiccup could not speak for the rest of his friends, but he and Astrid _tried_ to be mindful of what was proper, at least. Then, at some point, they grew up and learned how to conceal the more scandalous aspects of their relationship. When they were alone, any pretense of good behavior was usually left in the dust for much more satisfying pursuits.

She lowered her hood as she crossed the threshold, turning to gaze at him with an enticing little grin that momentarily made him forget about the shooting pain in his left leg. Another part of his anatomy was fighting for attention as he realized it would not be much longer before Astrid's naked body was wrapped around hisâ€"before she was writhing against him and moaning his name with unrestrainedâ€"

"Hiccup, did you hear me?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips impatiently.

"Hmm? Sorry. My mind was...somewhere else," he answered.

Between your thighs, actually, he thought, and immediately gave himself a mental slap for it.

Astrid absentmindedly swept her braid back over her shoulder, and Hiccup was struck by how beautiful she was with even the most insignificant of gestures. She was annoyed by his supposed lack of attention, but she did not realize how much of his consciousness was still devoted to her, completely. She had ownership of his heart, and he wanted her by his side in all things. If she was relaxed in his home, then he was glad, because she belonged thereâ€"she belonged wherever he was. In fact, he felt more at ease in his own house when she visited, and after only a few months, he could no longer imagine a life without Astrid in it. It was strangeâ€"a bit frightening, evenâ€"to hinge one's future on another person. People were, by nature, fallible and often unreliableâ€"but Astrid? She was a constant. She was unbendable. Unyielding. Steadfast, loyal, and consistent. Hiccup could make an exception for herâ€"all the exceptions he needed.

He had tried not to give it too much thought, but chief he had encountered on his trip, who treated his wife as his equal in life, had inspired feelings in him he was not yet prepared to tackleâ€"feelings that nagged at him with fierce persistence. Words like "marriage" and "forever" swirled about his brain, but he had approached the subject with deliberate vagueness in his letters to Astrid. He did not know how to breach the subject, even though it was one that was inevitable, regardless if they stayed together or not.

Hiccup remembered writing the very words down on parchment as he described the couple he had met. He had scribbled his letter by the light of the campfire as his father's thunderous snoring assaulted him all the way from the tent they shared. Sneaky had been playing by his feet, tormenting a poor crab that scuttled about in a panic, unsure of its escape. Hiccup could remember glancing up from his letter frequently, ensuring there were no other Vikings around to witness his amiable relationship with the Terrible Terrorâ€"Berk was still the only place they knew of where Vikings and dragons were at peace, and his father had made it a point to safeguard that fact. As he wrote to Astrid, he thought about his own circumstances, for he was not naive. He knew he was to succeed his father when the time came, and that inevitably meant marriage as a part of the deal. Seeing that one chief interact with his wife as an equal made him consider what he wanted for himself, and who he wanted it with. Of course, it had not been a long inner dialogue. There was only one sensible option in his mind, though he had never voiced it aloud to anyone.

"I asked you if I should spend the night here" Astrid repeated, staring at him intently.

His desire for her screamed "Yes!", but as was typical, rationality won out.

"I think we'd be too obvious. I mean, I just got back. Your parents

can only pretend to be ignorant to all of this as long as we aren't flaunting it their faces," he explained. "We're already walking a fine line, where they're concerned."

He knew, when the night grew cold and he was alone in his bed, he would regret his logical decision. Astrid, too, appeared disappointed but she did not argue. She merely shrugged and turned for the stairs.

He wanted to call after herâ€”to explain that their occasional sleepovers were a temporary arrangement. He planned to make their cohabitation permanent one day. He intended to come to her and ask the very earnest question, to admit that he wanted her to be his equal, and to admit that he did not want to rule Berk without her partnership. He tried to imply as much in his last letter, hoping that Astrid would find the willingness to discuss the very uncomfortable subject of marriage. He had hoped she would understand, and that she would admit she wanted the same thingâ€”but wedlock was not a pleasant topic for her, all things considered. So, Hiccup said nothing as he followed her up to his bedroom.

Eventually, they would reach a point where the conversation could no longer be avoided, and Hiccup was certain that running headlong into a wall would be far less painful than trying to talk to his lover about marriage. He could not bring himself to do it any sooner than necessary, so he resigned himself to quietly imagine a happy future that might be no closer to reality in the face of Astrid's aversion to matrimony.

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><p>If it had become any colder outside since they left the Great Hall, Astrid would not have noticed. She felt ablaze as she lie on her side, body pressed firmly against Hiccup's. It was such a comforting sensation to feel his skin against hers, and to know that he wanted her with all the same urgency with which she wanted him. It really was his fault, with all the romantic musings he had sent to her over the past week. She had found it hard to keep her daydreams from taking a more scandalous turn, though there had been nothing too risque in his letters. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he had been thinking about her, or that he had the ability to articulate things she could not? She supposed it really did not matter anymoreâ€”not that they were finally together again.<p>

Hiccup held her tightly with one arm wrapped around her torso, gently fondling her breast, while his other hand had slipped between her legs, relentlessly teasing that spot that made her squirm back against him. She tilted her head back, claiming his lips as he increased the speed and strength of his thrusts to Astrid's liking. She knew he would have been content to keep it sweet and steady for a while longer, but he often put her satisfaction above his own. That was just his way. She had never encouraged him to do so, but he did not need the instruction. He had confessed to her that he enjoyed pleasing herâ€”that it was its own validationâ€”but she still rewarded him with a wanton wiggle of her hips against his. He moaned appreciatively and gave a reflexive, hard thrust that made her sigh into their kiss. Hiccup could pretend otherwise, but there was a primal side to him that preferred the rougher side of sex just as much as she did.

"Okay, so I really did miss you," she panted as their lips parted for a breath.

Hiccup laughed softly and buried his face in her hair.

"I missed you, too," he murmured before planting a trail of tender kisses down her neck and shoulder.

There was a part of Astrid that knew the way they snuck around the island, making love in secret when they could, was considered horribly wrong by most, but in that aspect of her life, she was content to be imperfect. There was just something about her and Hiccup together that felt right—that made sense. Being with him was so easy and so deeply fulfilling—more than anything else she had ever known. At a time when they were both so equally exposed and vulnerable, Astrid regretted burning the final letter she had written to him. When her emotional walls were all the way down, she could stomach him knowing how she really felt—how he made her rethink her whole stance on marriage.

Before him, she had not wanted it. The idea of being tied to a man repulsed her. Indeed, her first experience with an engagement was a miserable one, and it seemed only natural that she should hate the idea—but she did not.

She could not.

In all honesty, marriage was what she really wanted as long as it was Hiccup who was to be her husband.

He would have to take a wife when he became Chief of Berk. It was his duty, and Astrid supposed that was the very reason he had never said anything about it. Wedlock was yet another chain to bind him, and she doubted his love for her made the idea any more pleasant for him. She could have worked up the courage to tell him that she wanted him for life—to be his equal as his letter had implied. She could have verbalized the content of her letter—but Hiccup had not brought it up again. In fact, he had been dry and sarcastic about any of his responsibilities upon returning to Berk, so whatever motivation she may have had to have a heartfelt discussion of their future quickly withered into ash beside her burned up letter.

For a little while, she was able to push it from her mind. The serious subject matter faded in the presence of a week's worth of pent up passions. But in the afterglow of sex, when all was silent except for their heavy breathing as they clung to one another, serious thoughts intruded again. Hiccup was blissfully unaware of Astrid's mental unrest as he pressed his cheek into the back of her bare shoulder.

"That...was incredible," he said, giving her an affectionate little squeeze. "I love you, Astrid Hofferson."

Astrid felt her heart pound beneath her ribs, unable to return to a steadier rhythm as she wrestled with the urge to tell him what was on her mind—to confess everything. It was only Hiccup, after all. He would not get upset, or laugh at her, or marginalize her feelings in any way—and yet, how to breach a topic he so ardently resisted? How productive would it truly be? What would be accomplished other than the unburdening of her own weighted soul at the expense of her pride,

should he not be as receptive to the idea of marriage as she was?

There was only one way she knew ofâ€”one method that had always worked when softening an emotional blow.

Humor and dismissiveness.

She could probe for answers without seeming too emotionally invested in his response. It was worth a shot, lest her mind never find any rest.

"I guess it will be a bit of an adjustment for you whenever my last name changes," she said, in what she hoped was a playful tone.

She felt his fingers twitch against her abdomen and his breath caught. She was not sure if that was a good sign or not.

* * *

><p>Astrid was bringing up marriage? Right then? Right after they had justâ€”?<p>

Her words sent his sex-addled brain reeling, and he struggled to construct an appropriate response.

Was she serious? She did not sound serious.

Was she bating him? Was it one of those conversation traps other young men complained about? No. That seemed too underhanded for Astrid, but he still did not know how to respond.

He could only manage to answer her quip with one of his own.

"I don't think Haddock is too far a departure from Hofferson. I think I'll catch on quickly," he replied, lightheartedly, and he hoped he was not crossing whatever invisible boundaries Astrid might have set on the issue.

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><p>Astrid's heart skipped a beat. His tone of voice was very casual, but he had offered up his last name without hesitation. Of course, there was a chance he was making fun of her and the entire notion of marriage in general, but that just did not seem like Hiccup.<p>

She took it further.

"What makes you so sure it will be you and me?"

* * *

><p>"Ruffnut's not really my type, and unless you've suddenly found Snotlout appealingâ€”"<p>

Astrid made a gagging noise and Hiccup grinned.

It was not at all how he expected their first talk about marriage unfold, but it seemed to be heading in a positive direction as long as there was an underlying truth to it all, and he was determined to

keep it that way.

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><p>Astrid knew there was no one else on berk Hiccup had his eye on, and there was no other young man that could make her feel the way he did. He may have found the whole conversation humorous, as Astrid had intended, but there were serious implications in it that made her heart flutter excitedly. At the very least, Hiccup had not outright rejected the idea of marriage, and that was a good start.<p>

"So, we're stuck together by the sound of it," she remarked.

"Seems that way."

"Well, don't think I'll be some idle wife. I hope you're prepared for a lifetime of nagging and advice, whether you want it or not. I can't just let you run Berk into the ground," she teased.

"Are you suggesting we'll be equals then?" Hiccup asked.

"Are you suggesting we won't be?" Astrid retorted, with comically exaggerated indignation.

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><p>So, it had all come down to the content of his letter and what was implicit in it. Astrid had been able to read between the lines and was addressing it in her own way. He had been correct in thinking she had little to no interest in a meaningful conversation on the subject, but she was not as opposed to the idea as he had feared. She had taken the initiative to bring it up, without being prompted to do so. In his limited understanding of the female brain and its mysterious motivations, it at least meant Astrid had given marriage some thought, and she did not completely hate the idea.<p>

For the time being, he could work with that, even if she had a few more laughs at his expense.

"Nothing would make me happier than to have you by my side, Astrid," he replied, in all seriousness.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of their bodies pressed together. With Astrid at least somewhat receptive to the idea of marriage, he could find some measure of hope that one night he might hold her as his wife—and that was a very comforting thought, indeed.

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><p>Astrid's smile faltered with the change in his voice. Hiccup had suddenly ceased all joking, and there was a tenderness in his embrace that was unexpected. She had thought their volley of laughs would be the extent of it, never crossing into a greater depth of feeling, but he had taken it there. She had not asked, nor had she badgered him. He had confessed that he wanted her as his wife, completely of his own volition. She was afraid for a moment that she had misunderstood—and took a joke for a confession with some wishful thinking.<p>

She turned her head and he opened one eye when he sensed her gaze upon him. He smiled at her, and the affection was sincere. At some point, he had decided they were no longer making light of marriage, and yet he seemed genuinely content with the idea. Perhaps he had meant everything he had saidâ€”everything that had been implied? Again, Hiccup was the one secure in his feelings while Astrid floundered about insecurely. How to be forthcoming and sensitive without being weak? It was her ongoing struggle, but Hiccup did not seem to require the outpouring of emotion on her part. She was his counterbalanceâ€”the rough, Viking demeanor for his more kind and compassionate soul. He did not need for her to be soft and vulnerable to understand her. They managed to work with all their individual shortcomings.

Perhaps he really did not need to know the contents of the letter she destroyed? In her own way, she could communicate enough of its content, and Hiccup understood. At the end, they arrived in the same place with less stumbling through that awkward quagmire of emotion that left Astrid so uncomfortable. In the end, she could tell him what she really wanted through jokes and playful jabs while he was at ease being candid. Could it really be considered dysfunctional if it worked for them? Astrid did not know, but she was glad she could encourage Hiccup to be open without compromising what it was that made her, well...her.

"So, you're saying you want to marry me, Hiccup?" she asked teasingly, feeling a bubble of elation rapidly swelling in her chest.

"If that wasn't clear enough, I suppose my love letters could really use some work," he replied sarcastically.

Astrid laughed, pleased they had achieved a mutually comfortable means of discussing such an emotionally charged subject. She would not hesitate to tease Hiccup about similarly heavy issues in the years to come, if it proved productive for the both of themâ€”and she certainly would not sweat the charred remnants of an inconsequential love note, smoldering in the heart of a crackling fire, words forever lost to no one's lasting detriment.

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****Author's Note:**** Finally got around to Nagareboshi Star's request for a follow-up to "Letters". I realize you probably wanted Hiccup to hear the contents of Astrid's last love note he never got to read, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it would be contrary to Astrid's character for her to turn around and recite it to him after she had burned it up so resolutely, to protect her persona of toughness. I thought about other ways they would come to the same resolution, and this is what I got. I have written that they have a very lighthearted attitude towards marriage because the serious talk is a bit too real for the both of them. This would be the first time they ever talked about it in my canon, and it explains how that playful banter on the subject arose between them.

End
file.